

FROST
AND
FRIENDSHIP

GEORGE FREDERIC TURNER

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FROST AND FRIENDSHIP





“ ‘ Why should you consider my interests at all ? ’
she inquired.” (Page 96.)

Frost and Friendship]

[*Frontispiece*

FROST AND FRIENDSHIP

BY
GEORGE FREDERIC TURNER.

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Frost and Friendship.

CHAPTER I

NOVEMBER is a depressing month. I am not thinking of fogs. Personally, being an idle man, I love fogs. Not only do their subtle and constantly changing colours appeal to the aesthetic side of my nature, but the contemplation of innumerable fussy beings hurrying in directions diametrically opposed to their volition throws me into a mild ecstasy of philosophic amusement.

No, with fogs I have no quarrel; but I admit that the damp dull day that is neither hot nor cold, foggy nor clear, but cheerless, colourless and unrefreshingly devoid of air, drives my thoughts inwards till I become a prey to a morbid and unnatural introspection.

That is why, on a certain unprepossessing November morning some three years ago, I was sitting down to an excellent breakfast of scrambled eggs and fried bacon, under the conviction that life, so far as I was concerned, was a failure unredeemed and irredeemable. But then I was nearly twenty-eight years of age, and though my health was good in its way, there were things, pastry and pale ale

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for instance, which I could no longer take with the impunity of my early youth.

Perhaps I was suffering from an excess of what scripturally-minded people call "earthly blessings."

Money, the great vulgar root of evil which most of us cherish and water so assiduously in our back gardens, had blossomed for me, unplanted, uncultivated and presumably undeserved.

My father who, starting from a humble, not to say obscure origin, had ended by owning the third largest milliner's shop in Oxford Street, had died leaving me a quarter of a million of his hard-earned gold. A similar sum would come to me on the decease of my mother. My present depression therefore could hardly be due to a harassing difficulty in making both ends meet.

The grey-haired little lady who faced me from the other side of the coffee-things noted my dejection.

"You don't seem very lively this morning, Robert," she remarked.

"Do I often seem very lively in the morning, mother?"

"No," she retorted drily, "I can't say you're a very cheerful breakfast companion. Still, you seem a shade duller than usual this morning."

"I am rather tired of life," I said, as undramatically as I could.

My mother thought fit to laugh. "Why don't you marry?" she asked.

"Because I don't believe in violent remedies," I replied. "Besides, you know that nothing would induce me to leave you."

"I know nothing of the sort," was the sharp response. "You'd leave me to-morrow if you fell in love. Any man would, and small blame to him either."

"I have no intention of falling in love."

Again my mother laughed. "Has any one ever any intention of falling into anything?" she asked.

"I mean," I said, "that I am no longer a raw youth. I have seen something of the world, and am weary of the persecutions of London life. I am rich, and Society matrons try and marry their daughters to rich men. I have the further attractions of being still under middle age and not dropping my h's."

"And of being a draper's son," added my beloved parent.

"That does not matter," I retorted. "Birth goes for little nowadays, and rightly so. Still, even on that score I can claim a good descent on the maternal side."

"You can claim it," said my mother, with her scornful smile, "but your claim will in all probability be disallowed. When I married your father, I ceased to be a Dumorion and became a Saunders. Now 'Saunders' suggests silk petticoats and remnant days."

I did not ask her how it was she had married a man so far her inferior socially. I had done so on a previous occasion, and the answer had been "because he was a man." The union, by the way, had been a love-match and a very happy one.

"You are depressed," went on my mother in her incisive fashion, "you are tired of life, as you call it, and generally an insufferable companion, because you are afflicted acutely with that prevalent and distressing complaint, conceit. Because you are wealthy, you fancy that every mother you meet has some snub-nosed offspring in the background whom she will endeavour to palm off on you on the first opportunity. Because you played in the Eton eleven and subsequently made 56 not out for Cambridge against Oxford, you fancy that your name is a household word with the sporting public; whereas they have long forgotten the little they ever knew about you. You fancy because your father was a man of exceptional energy, that you inherit his vigour together with the brains and beauty of your mother—which is a delusion."

"You are very refreshing, dearest," I replied. "It is quite possible that you are right, and that I have not inherited the virtues of my forbears, but merely their conceit. And yet, when I say that I am tired of life, I do not mean that I am tired of contemplating my own perfections. Merely that dances bore me, men bore me, women—well, women who, according to books should be angels or devildesses, are neither, but just women and the greatest bore of all."

"But business——"

"Business I respect—from a distance. My subordinates are so thoroughly conscientious, so unflaggingly energetic, so infinitely superior to myself in all the qualities which make for commercial

success, that I feel it would be detrimental to British trade in general, and to the firm of James Saunders and Son in particular, to make my nominal position as head of the business a real one."

My mother sighed, rose from the table and approached the sideboard where the daily papers and the morning's correspondence were reposing in dignified proximity to an uncut ham.

"It's a pity you're a failure, Robert," she said, "for I rather like you. At times you talk just like your mother. There," she added, as I interrupted her remarks with a kiss, "take your letters, foolish boy, and try and find something in them to cheer your downcast spirit."

The first few envelopes I opened contained little of a cheering nature. A big bill for cigars, a couple of dance invitations, several epistles of a begging nature, and—most deadly of all—an invitation to a Bridge-tea. The most interesting looking communication I kept till last. It bore a foreign stamp, the envelope was enormous, and the address written in a neat, but ridiculously minute hand. On the back was a gorgeous coat of arms, and forgetful of the stamp, I began to have horrible visions of a half-past-six-dinner at a City company.

"Well," said my mother, as an exclamation of surprise forced itself to my lips, "What is it?"

"An invitation from a King," I replied, with unnatural calmness.

"From a king! From what king?"

"His Majesty King Karl XXII of Grimland."

"That's the man you were introduced to after

the tennis tournament at Weidenbruck last year, isn't it ? ”

“ It is,” I answered ; “ I thought he had taken a fancy to me. As a winner I was invited to dine at the Palace, and his manner at the conclusion of that festive meal was most gracious. I put it down to royal affability tinged with Pommery and Greno ; but it appears it was something more. He has asked me to stay a month or six weeks at Weissheim.”

“ At Weissheim ? ”

“ Yes, at Weissheim, a small town some thirty miles south-east of Weidenbruck, where His Majesty has a winter palace.”

“ And you will accept the invitation ? ”

“ Naturally,” I replied.

“ Your scruples about leaving your dear mother notwithstanding ? ”

“ Six weeks is not a lifetime,” I retorted, “ and if you wish it you can come too. The Pariserhof is, I am told, an excellent hotel.

“ Thank you,” replied my mother coolly ; “ I prefer South Kensington.”

“ As you will,” I said. “ Personally I shall be delighted to leave London for a space.”

For several minutes there was silence, during which I re-read the royal epistle which had so transformed the dreary outlook of my thoughts.

“ DEAR MR. SAUNDERS,” it ran,

“ It would give us much pleasure if you could come and stay with us at the Brun-varad this winter. Weissheim is no longer merely a summer resort, for

the winter season, which lasts from the beginning of November to the end of February, is a very festive and busy time. Weissheim, as you probably know is some six thousand odd feet above sea level, but the cold is of such a dry character and the sunshine so continuous and brilliant, that to my mind the winter is the time, par excellence, to enjoy its charms. I myself prefer it at all times to Weidenbruck, which, like most capitals, suffers from the noise and disquietude inevitably engendered by an excess of trams and politicians. I should suggest your coming at the beginning of January, and staying at least a month—six weeks if you can manage it. I fear I shall not be able to take my revenge on you at lawn tennis, but we have a great variety of winter sports which are most fascinating.

“KARL R.”

Decidedly and on all grounds the invitation was one worthy of acceptance. Winter sports! Dry cold and a brilliant sun! The guest of royalty in a royal palace! Assuredly life was not the appallingly dull affair it had seemed a quarter of an hour before. My mother interrupted my rapturous meditations.

“Robert, dear,” she said “I am surprised at your being so eager to leave London just now. I fancied you had taken a liking to that Blackwood girl. You danced twice with her the other night at Lady Fitz-Archibald’s.”

It was my turn to laugh now. “To dance two dances,” I remarked, “out of a possible twenty-three with the same female, does not constitute

an engagement in this country. It does not even argue a strong natural affinity. Agatha Blackwood is a pretty girl with the soul of a butterfly. The type is one that pleases the eye and the eye alone. When, oh when, will mother and matchmaker cease to be convertible terms ? ”

“ When mothers cease to have sons and daughters,” was the swift reply. Doubtless also it was a truthful one.

CHAPTER II

EVERY board-school pupil knows where Grimland is. For those who have not had the advantage of a state-aided education, I may as well say that it lies in a triangle between Germany, Austria and Russia, and that it takes forty-eight solid and continuous hours of travelling to get there. Personally I am fond of travelling, and enjoy sufficient immunity from sea-sickness and train weariness to claim with justice the designation of "a good traveller."

And yet, when a consultation with my watch disclosed the fact that I had but one little hour more to spend in my over-heated compartment, a feeling of vast relief spread over me, I stretched my lethargic limbs to their full extent, and gave vent to a prolonged and highly musical yawn. Then I looked out of the window. It was pitch dark and had been so for over an hour; and yet I knew that I was travelling through some of the loveliest scenery, and over one of the most wonderfully engineered lines in Europe. I yawned again, and this time my ears seemed to crack, for we had been coming up hill steadily for some little time and the reduced pressure was playing pranks with my tympana. Then as our funny little mountain engine ceased

its tugging labours and stopped at Riefinsdorf, the terminus, I collected my "handgepäck" and a couple of Tauchnitz volumes and descended on to the platform. It was amazingly cold after the stuffy atmosphere of the train, and I felt grateful for my thick ulster which I had abused so unsparingly at various points of my journey.

My train disgorged a goodly number of fellow travellers, and the little Riefinsdorf platform was speedily crowded with well-wrapped mortals searching for luggage and chartering vehicles to convey them to Weissheim. I was wondering just what to do, when a man in a beautiful fur coat and a gold-laced cap came up and saluted me.

"Mr. Saunders?" he inquired. I replied in the affirmative.

"Kindly give me your luggage ticket."

I complied, and my imposing friend passed on the piece of yellow paper to a subordinate.

"Follow me, sir."

Again I did as I was bid, and a moment later the emblazoned door of a carriage and pair was thrown open for me. I entered, a rug was placed over my knees, a whip cracked, and I had started for the Brun-varad, the winter palace of the King of Grimland.

So ignorant was I of winter travelling in cold countries that it was several minutes before I realised that my conveyance was progressing on runners and not on wheels. Onward we swung and lurched into the darkness, for all I knew at the edge of some appalling precipice, and apparently at a great rate

of speed. There was something extremely fascinating in this, drive through an unknown country, with its outlook of utter blackness and its hazily imagined termination at the fabled Brun-varad.

Why, I wondered, had King Karl invited me. Was it for the sake of my "beaux yeux," or did he know I was wealthy and want to borrow money of me? I had heard of kings doing such things; but as the remembrance of my big, good-natured, sport-loving host came back to me, the theory of the "beaux yeux" seemed the most plausible. "The 'ayes' have it," I murmured modestly to myself, "and after all a monarch might easily have a less interesting and presentable guest than my humble self."

A blaze of light shining suddenly through my carriage window interrupted my meditations. It proceeded from a vast building with many rows of illuminated windows. Then as my eyes caught the gilded inscription "Pariserhof," I realized that the objective of my journey had not yet been reached. We passed now through a fairly wide street lined with shops and hostelries, and lighted with electric arc lamps. The shops, indeed, were all shut and but a few muffled forms were visible in the snow-carpeted thoroughfare, but the place nevertheless wore an air of comfortable and up to date prosperity. Unquestionably this was Weissheim, and the size of the town was greater than I had supposed. We passed a handsome Catholic church with a snow encrusted dome; a big square building with a couple of old mortars set before the

arched doorway and a general impress of military occupation ; we skirted a large open space, with what looked like a town hall on one side of it and a theatre on the other. With its setting of snow, its absence of visible life, its intense silence, the place esemed vaguely unreal, a scene painting rather than a habitable town, a dream city rather than a man-created bulwark against the still intense cold of that superlatively frigid region.

Then we plunged into the darkness again, and it was fully ten minutes before we halted at what I made no doubt was the Brun-varad, the ancestral home of Grimland's monarchy.

I had a vision of a great sentinelled gateway of which the posts bore huge fantastic balls of snow ; then, as we drove up the white sweep of the approach, of a high roofed tower with a great Gothic archway at its base. Beyond, a huge flank of window-pierced wall, a precipice of rough-hewn stones corniced with great dependent icicles and crowned with a tiled roof of so steep a pitch that the snow found little or no lodgment on it, save where the dormer windows broke its steep incline. The building was grim, indefinite, mediaeval, and my first impression of it, seen in the warm half-light of its own illuminated windows and with its setting of deep immaculate snow, was of a fairy castle fresh from the pages of Hans Andersen.

We did not pull up at the great archway, but drove round to a smaller entrance at the side. As we stopped, my fur-coated friend with the gold-rimmed cap appeared once more, presumably from the box-

seat of my conveyance, and rang a bell. The doors of the palace were thrown open, and stepping out of the royal sleigh with a delightful and totally unaccustomed feeling of nervousness, I entered the habitation of my exalted host. An individual in a black morning-coat approached—bald, dignified, amply-whiskered, gently supercilious. Behind, around, flunkeys in green and golden coats, red plush knickerbockers, white stockings and powdered hair. Like most of my countrymen when feeling slightly overwhelmed, I smiled.

The black-coated gentleman bowed.

“I trust you have had a pleasant journey, Mr. Saunders,” he said in faultless English.

“Quite, thank you,” I replied.

“His Majesty is in the billiard room,” pursued my stately welcomer. “He will be pleased to see you at once, if you will divest yourself of your overcoat.”

A couple of stalwart flunkeys succeeded in removing my superfluous attire and I followed the benevolent chef-de-reception down a long corridor. Everywhere groined ceilings, panelled walls, and electric lights in the most modern fittings!

The whiskered dignity opened the billiard-room door. His Majesty King Karl XXII of Grimland was in the middle of his stroke; he was trying to pot his adversary. We waited breathlessly and in silence. At the consummation—an unsuccessful one, for the white ball, after wobbling uncertainly in the jaws of the pocket, remained provokingly in view—his Majesty looked up and saw us.

"Hullo, Saunders!" he cried, leaning his cue against the table whence it slithered noisily to the floor, "My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," and smiling all over his swarthy good-natured face he shook me warmly by the hand.

"I trust your Majesty is in the enjoyment of good health," I remarked formally.

"I always enjoy good health, thank you," he answered, "and never better than here in the dear old Brun-varad. But permit me to present you to the company. This young lady, my opponent at billiards and invariable vanquisher, is a fellow countrywoman of yours, Miss Anchester. Miss Anchester—Mr. Saunders." Here I received a bow from a slim fair-haired young woman with a singularly fresh complexion and a pair of cool grey unemotional eyes. "The other young lady," went on the King, indicating a dark and distinctly pretty girl who was sitting on a high leather seat between a small boy in a sailor suit and a somewhat smaller girl in white, "the young lady who is trying, fairly successfully, to keep my unruly progeny in order, is Her Royal Highness the Prinzessin Mathilde von Schattenberg, daughter of my cousin, the Grand Duke Fritz. The gentleman who is so kindly acting as scorer, is my commander-in-chief, General Meyer. General Meyer—Mr. Saunders."

A tall, stooping-shouldered individual bowed humorously—if a bow can be humorous—towards me. He was rather past middle age, of unmistakably Jewish origin, and his features displayed a mixture of cleverness, lazy good humour, and cynicism.

"Now you know everybody," concluded the King.

"With the exception of the unruly progeny," I corrected.

"Ah, permit me. This is his Royal Highness the Duke of Weissheim, heir apparent to the throne and prospective twenty-third Karl of Grimland." Here I received a small and sticky palm which I shook gravely, "and this is her Royal Highness the Princess Wilhelmina," and at these words, and much to my astonishment, a pair of tiny arms were thrown round my neck and I received a warm and somewhat embarrassing salutation. Every one laughed, and I was just beginning to feel comfortable again, when of a sudden, silence fell upon the company. Looking up I saw the reason. Her Majesty the Queen had entered. She was a little woman, stately, imperious, almost beautiful, but with bad temper written in every line of her hard unfeeling countenance. Her thin red lips were pressed tightly together, her big dark eyes flashed angrily from her pale face, and it was obvious that she had seen the embrace and thoroughly disapproved of it.

"Miss Anchester," she said coldly, "will you please conduct the children to the nursery. It is quite time they went to bed."

Then turning her gaze to me, whom she had met before, she stretched out her hand without a word. Taking it in the tips of my fingers I bent low over it and touched it ceremoniously with my lips.

"Karl," continued her Majesty, in her unpleasant tones, "it is quite time you went and dressed for dinner," and with that she followed Miss An-

chester who was conveying the children from the room, and left us. The sense of relief was palpable and immediate. King Karl turned to us with a comical shrug of his big shoulders, and the humorous lines on General Meyer's face deepened to a positive grin. The Princess Mathilde tittered audibly, and then as I turned to her, involuntarily smiling in turn, she burst into a peal of laughter, free, musical, and refreshingly unrestrained.

"We all have a fly in our ointment," said the King with a gesture, "my ointment is the Brun-varad."

"His Majesty does not specify his fly," commented the general drily."

"It's scarcely necessary," retorted the monarch. "Come, Saunders, it is time to dress for dinner. *La reine le veult*. Our major-domo, Herr Bomcke, will show you to your room. And remember, at the Brun-varad we reduce ceremony to as near the vanishing point as possible."

CHAPTER III

MY first dinner at the Brun-varad was quite a small affair. To be exact we sat down eight, and we dined in a small room in the Waffenthurm, the great tower I had noticed on my arrival. The apartment was panelled from floor to ceiling in age-darkened pine, while the ceiling itself was inlaid with a fine design of variously coloured woods. Trophies of spears and ancient muskets adorned the walls. A huge boar's head grinned wickedly at us from above the high stone mantelpiece, and in each corner of the room a small stuffed bear supported an electric lamp.

The table at which we sat was circular in shape, and devoid of any covering. It was of dark, slightly polished oak, showing off to advantage the fine old silver and beautiful glass which garnished our meal. In the middle was a handsome gilt centrepiece from which there stretched to the ceiling a string of artificial wax flowers.

There were two individuals present whom I had not yet been introduced to. One was the Queen's companion and principal maid-of-honour, Fräulein von Helder, a young woman of about four and twenty, with a fat, pale, unprepossessing counten-

ance, and small pig-like eyes. The other was a short broad-shouldered person with a tremendously thick head of hair and a bushy beard and moustache of coal-black hue. He was the Grossherzog Fritz, the Princess' father. His evening dress fitted him abominably and he looked like a picturesque gardener.

"I hope you will like Weissheim, Mr. Saunders," said Her Majesty, whom I was privileged to sit next to, in the most cordial tones she could command. In her evening attire and by the artificial light she looked positively handsome. Her face indeed was pale, but the pallor was translucent and not opaque, and her features were clear-cut and distinctly well proportioned. She had a splendid head of gleaming bronze hair, her lips were red—perhaps I should say reddened—and she wore a profusion of jewels both on her shapely neck and on her vivid green gown. She was not perhaps the most ladylike figure in the world, but in her way she was undeniably striking.

"I feel sure I shall like Weissheim, your Majesty," I replied, "I have quite made up my mind on that point."

"One can persuade oneself to like most things," she retorted; "but I have never yet succeeded in liking Weissheim—not in winter that is to say. In the summer it is tolerable, but at this time of year I prefer Cannes."

"I have a weakness for clean snow," I said; "you see I am a Londoner."

"Then you can indulge your weakness to the

full," said General Meyer ; " snow is plentiful at Weissheim."

" It is five or six feet deep all over the fields," said the King, " and up on the mountains as much as twenty or thirty."

General Meyer had sneered at the snow as if it were something to be ashamed of. King Karl, on the contrary, was evidently proud of it.

" By the way, Saunders," continued His Majesty ; " are you any good at winter sports ? "

" I don't know," I replied ; " I have never tried my hand at them."

" Then you are hardly likely to be good at them."

It was Miss Anchester who made this somewhat caustic remark. I was annoyed, because if there is one thing I pride myself upon, it is my facility for games and pastimes, and I had no doubt that with a little practice I should equal, and very possibly excel, the regular habitués of the place.

Besides, Miss Anchester was a governess—I had discovered that—and governesses, even in a Royal household, are supposed to make themselves agreeable.

" Do winter sports require any special qualifications more than summer pastimes ? " I enquired with extreme politeness.

" They require a good deal of nerve."

I opened my eyes wide at this retort, insinuating as it did that I might conceivably be lacking in courage. Miss Anchester dropped her eyes before mine and plunged into a conversation with the

Grand Duke Fritz. She was certainly a very nice-looking girl in a cool English way. Her fair hair was bright, abundant, and simply done. Her features were regular, almost classic, absolutely calm, and her neck and arms had the roundness and suppleness of a more than ordinarily vigorous young womanhood. Her white evening dress was simplicity—severity itself; and in this, as in every other way, she was as perfect a foil to the Queen as a lover of contrasts could desire.

On physical grounds I was disposed to approve of her, and it seemed a pity she should be so disagreeable. Had she been otherwise I should certainly have taken the trouble to make myself entertaining to her. I turned to the Prinzessin who sat on my left.

“Do you like winter sports, Princess?” I asked.

“I love them,” was the enthusiastic response.

“And have you plenty of nerve?” I pursued sarcastically.

She laughed.

“Any amount,” was the whole-hearted reply. “Unfortunately, my father won’t let me go down the Kastel run.”

“The Kastel run?”

“Yes, the great toboggan run which starts near our home, the Marienkastel, and finishes close by the palace here.”

“You must try that some day,” put in the King. “It’s magnificent. Some of these fellows attain a maximum speed of nearly seventy miles an hour.”

“I will try to-morrow.”

"Have you ever done any tobogganning?" inquired Miss Anchester.

"A little," I replied, recalling some experiences of my early boyhood "on tea-trays." The governess' feelings were expressed by a slight but highly contemptuous smile.

"I would not advise you to go down the Kastel run to-morrow," she remarked drily.

"You fear my nerves would not prove equal to the occasion?"

"I fear your bones might not. It is only experienced tobogganners who go down the Kastel run. The Thal run is quite difficult, and quite dangerous enough for beginners. Then there is the Children's run behind the Pariserhof, which is quite easy. I should certainly advise you to start on the children's run."

"It sounds rather humiliating," I protested.

"It is far more humiliating than it sounds," was the quick retort. "Tobogganning may be classed as a dangerous sport. It is frequently fatal—to one's dignity."

"And do you toboggan?" I asked, considerably piqued.

"Does Miss Anchester toboggan!" broke in the King. "Why she goes down the Kastel run every day of the winter season except Sundays. She won the Grimland Derby last year in record time—2 minutes, 29½ seconds."

I had never heard of the Grimland Derby in my life: but it was doubtless considered a very important event in these parts, and her extraordinary

success accounted no doubt for the governess' supercilious tone towards a novice like myself. Nevertheless, as the King mentioned her achievement, her eyes fixed themselves on the centre of her plate, while a rosy blush over-spread her smooth and shapely cheek.

On the whole it was rather an amusing dinner. The chief talkers were the King who had a wonderful flow of spirits, and the Prinzessin, who seemed to regard life as a series of huge jokes. She was quite young—barely twenty I should have said—and I was forced to admit that my original verdict of “very pretty” had done her a considerable injustice. Her features were more than merely piquant, they were beautiful and delicately modelled. Ruddy as a berry, her complexion was clear and tremendously healthy, while her little black eyes were bright as beads, and laughed as gaily as her dainty lips. She was small, vivacious, enthusiastic, and alarmingly alive to the humorous side of things. She would have cheered up the veriest dullard on earth, and I, who have a fair capacity for badinage, contrived to tickle her sense of humour almost beyond the bounds of social decorum.

The Queen talked little, and what she said failed to add to the gaiety of the company, while the Fräulein von Helder seemed to care more for assuaging her enormous appetite than the refined pleasures of conversation. As for the Grand Duke, he helped the flow in a spasmodic and perfunctory way, but his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere and his utterances insincere. To the student of human nature

there was much food for study, but to my thinking the most interesting of the company was the commander-in-chief, General Meyer. For the most part he remained silent, listening and smiling like some humorous old sphinx, who, while despising mankind, could not help being amused by it. Occasionally he would put his eye-glass into his right eye, lean forward and deliver himself elaborately of some epigrammatic cynicism ; and then he would sip his wine and lean back again with a contented smile apparently well satisfied with his effort.

After dessert her Majesty and the three young ladies left us. Coffee was brought, and the attendants having withdrawn, we four men were left to ourselves. The King, who disliked nothing so much as having everything done for him, rose and unlocked a cupboard, producing a box of cigars.

"Have a priceless Havannah, Saunders?" he asked. "Take care not to drop it," he added, as I helped myself.

"Why not, sire?" I enquired.

"Because it will go into powder if you do. The air here is so extraordinarily dry that it is absolutely impossible to keep tobacco in good condition. Or one's hair either," he added passing his fingers through his thick upstanding locks.

"Yes," remarked General Meyer, making a wry face, "everything is extraordinarily dry here, especially the champagne."

"And your wit," added his Majesty.

"By the way, cousin," asked the Grand Duke, "have you had any more threatening letters lately?"

"No," replied the King, "and their unwonted absence is making me positively nervous. It's a strange thing being a king, Saunders," he went on to me. "Here am I, a benevolent monarch devoted to my people, a model husband, and a slave to affairs of state, and yet there is a party, a fairly large party, who if they were strong enough, or cunning enough, would drive me headlong from my place."

"It is incomprehensible," muttered the Grand Duke into his bushy beard.

"Your Majesty's army is loyal to the last man," sneered the General.

"And their chief is a man of immense energy," said the King drily, with a side glance at the last speaker, who was leaning back smoking in his seat, one arm thrown over the back of a chair, and his long legs stretched out reposefully in front of him.

"A man of immense mental energy," affirmed the commander-in-chief, blowing out a cloud of blue smoke. "Besides," he added slowly, "the ranks of loyalty have been lately strengthened by the advent of a distinguished stranger from England," and he waved his hand airily in my direction.

"I'd sooner have Saunders beside me in a tight place than some of your marvellously loyal officers," said the King. I had yet to learn that my royal host was the most apparently indiscreet and outspoken man in his kingdom. All the same, the strange half-serious compliment pleased me. It even thrilled me. I felt that if ever I were called upon to stand between the King of Grimland and danger I would remember those idle words and prove their truth.

"Your Majesty should not cast reflections upon your army," said the Grand Duke, rising and brushing some cigar-ash off his untidy dress-clothes.

"Your Majesty might do worse," said the General. "The officers in your Majesty's first regiment of guards, of which your Majesty's cousin His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Fritz has the honour to be colonel, are as dissipated a set of young blackguards as one cares to be saluted by."

"Dissipation and loyalty frequently go hand in hand," remarked the King thoughtfully. "It is the teetotal cobbler, the non-smoking lawyer, the vegetarian schoolmaster who are all republicans to the core of their anæmic hearts. The dissolute young guardsman has little but his loyalty and his dandy moustache to recommend him, and wisely enough he prizes them both." I looked to see the Grand Duke's anger rise at these uncomplimentary references to his regimental officers. He merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Boys will be boys," he remarked.

"Yes, but it is not necessary for them to be monkeys," retorted the General. The Grand Duke's face grew a shade darker.

"I hope you are not thinking of my son, General," he said.

"No," replied General Meyer with slow insolence. "I never think of dear Max after dinner : it would check digestion."

For a second the Grand Duke showed his white teeth like a dog, and I half feared violence. With

an effort he confined himself to a contemptuous gesture and a meaning nod.

"With your permission, cousin," he said, "I will withdraw. Her Majesty expressed a desire to talk with me after dinner concerning what guests I should invite to my Winter Ball at the Marienkastel."

"That," said the King, as the door closed behind his burly relative, "is the man whom the good Grimlanders would set upon the throne in the event of my being driven from my place."

"Assuming," I said, "that after such an untoward event he would consent to occupy it."

"The Grand Duke," remarked the General drily, "has many faults. A lack of ambition is not one of them. By the way, your Majesty, I have completed the scheme for dealing with a hypothetical rising which you commanded me to prepare. The suspected regiments are to be isolated as much as possible, and individuals of a high position who—" General Meyer stopped.

"It's all right," said the King, "you need not hesitate to speak before Saunders. He is an Englishman."

"I have not the slightest objection to speaking before Mr. Saunders," said the General. "The details I am about to place before you are far too technical for a civilian understanding, while the places I shall mention will be mere names to him and probably unpronounceable at that. I ceased my sweet discourse because it occurred to me that some one might be listening outside the door. It is

just the gentlemanly sort of thing your devoted cousin Fritz would love to do. Shall I open the door and see ? ”

“ Certainly not,” said the King. “ This chamber was built with a view to secrecy, and the man who can hear through that door has yet to be created.”

“ Then I take it we enjoy absolute privacy ? ”

“ Unquestionably. This is the old Schweigenkammer, an apartment used by my less reputable predecessors for secret entertainments of a festive character. Not only could no one outside by any possibility overhear what was taking place within, but no servants even were allowed in the room. The difficulty of getting fresh courses served was overcome in an ingenious way. On a spring being pressed, this round table here descended bodily through the floor. The dirty plates were removed and fresh viands set upon the table, which on a lever being pulled below mounted again into its original position.”

“ And does it work still ? ” I said.

“ Certainly,” replied the King. “ As a matter of fact the knowledge of some of the goings on which used to take place here managed at one time to leak out. No one could imagine how. Then it was discovered that a small man from the room below could climb up into the cylinder which supports this table, and hear, fairly distinctly, any conversation that was taking place.”

I looked under the table, and perceived that it was supported by a big circular post which looked like the section of a largish oak trunk. This, no

doubt, was hollow and capable of containing the body of a small human being.

"I will show you how it works if you like," continued his Majesty. "In fact there is no reason why we should not make a descent into the chamber beneath. Come, my friends, mount the Zaubertisch—the magic table."

Following our host's suggestion we scrambled on to the table, being careful to avoid upsetting the decanters and wine-glasses which littered it. When we were all three comfortably in position, the King leant forward and putting his hand inside the mouth of the grinning boar's head, which he could now easily reach, pressed a lever. Instantly a circular piece of flooring gave way beneath us in two flaps and I realised that we were hanging from the ceiling by the chain of artificial wax flowers which I had deemed but part of the general decoration. Slowly the chain lengthened and the table sank beneath us till the floor was level with our faces, and finally above our heads.

"It's all right," said the King, as the Zaubertisch came to an abrupt stop, "we don't go any further. Hullo! Who was that?"

The last exclamation was caused by the slamming of the door. Someone had just left the room in which we now found ourselves, and judging from the violence of the slam, the exit had been a hurried one.

"Who was that?" repeated the King, jumping from the table. Rushing to the door he flung it open, but all that met his gaze was a dark silent corridor merging into absolute gloom.

The King repeated his interrogation for the third time, and this time with an oath.

The chamber to which we had descended was unlighted, and would have been absolutely dark but for the circular hole above our heads which admitted a broad stream of light from the brilliantly illuminated Schweigenkammer. It was lofty of pitch, a room of massive beams and rough unplastered masonry. The table, on which the General and I remained standing, was some height above the floor, for the big central shaft which had seemed to support it had in reality passed clean through the floor, doubtless with the object of steadying it ; otherwise, hung as it was by a single chain in the centre, it would have swayed and wobbled at every touch. The base of the shaft now rested on the floor of the lower chamber leaving us at least five feet from the ground. At the King's last enquiry we scrambled down and looked around. On one side was a huge stone fireplace capable of concealing half a dozen people, but which as a matter of fact proved to be quite empty. The only piece of furniture in the room was a plain deal chair lying on its side. The General sniffed meditatively.

"Judging from the pleasant odour," he remarked, "I should say it was some one who was smoking one of your Majesty's cigars."

"Fritz !" ejaculated the King.

"He could hardly have got into that," I said, tapping the table's supporting shaft, and thinking of the Grand Duke's enormously wide shoulders.

"He could not overhear otherwise," said the

King decisively. "Perhaps he was helping some one else."

At this moment I caught sight of General Meyer's face. His gaze was rivetted to the floor and his expression was that of a man who has solved a highly puzzling mystery. Following the direction of his glance I saw what I should certainly have seen before had not my eyes taken some time to accustom themselves to the gloom of the lower chamber. There on the floor, and pojecting from the bottom of the table's shaft was a decent sized piece of a lady's skirt. It was of a vivid green colour.

The explanation was obvious. Someone who knew the secret of the table had climbed up into the hollow cylinder with the manifest intention of hearing General Meyer's report. That someone had failed to anticipate the possibility of the mechanism being put into play, and the result had been as neat and dramatic a capture as the heart of a dramatist could have desired.

With regard to the prisoner's identity, the particular shade of the green skirt and its rich trimming of old Brussels lace left us in no doubt whatever.

The situation was intensely comic and neither of my two companions was deficient in the capacity for appreciating the humorous. Yet there was a look on the King's face, I had not expected to see, a look that took away the desire to laugh, and made me realise that however farcical the details, I was face to face with a very real tragedy. A hand was laid gently on my arm. It was the General's.

"Let us two go and have a game of billiards," he said.

CHAPTER IV

I FOLLOWED General Meyer down the dark corridor, stretching out my arms to protect myself from imaginary obstacles. The General seemed to know the way well, for he never troubled to strike a light even when the darkness became absolute. Presently we came to a narrow slit in the masonry which admitted a faint but welcome gleam from the snow-lit night without. I could just see that we were at the foot of a circular stone stairway and this we mounted. At the top a heavy, iron-studded door gave on to a corridor, and after a long and highly intricate meandering we found ourselves outside the billiard-room door.

The sound of voices within met our ears, and I was about to enter when the General checked me with a hand on my arm and a finger on his own lips. Evidently the policy of eavesdropping was not confined to the King's enemies. Disagreeable though it was to participate in such an odious practice, I realised that the proceeding was one in which I was rather a spectator than an actor, and that I had no more right to object to this method of procedure than an onlooker at a game of cards has a right to call attention to an irregularity in the play. After all, I reflected, the situation perhaps was sufficiently serious to justify this meeting of guile by guile, and

honour, like morality, was largely an affair of latitude and longitude.

The first voice I heard was that of the Princess Mathilde. There was no laughter in her tones now but the quavering excitement of scornful anger.

"You call yourself a priest," she said bitterly, "and you are ignorant of a priest's first duty—obedience."

"Who told you a priest's first duty was obedience?" was the calm retort in a singularly deep voice.

"I know it," was the inconsequent reply. "Is not discipline the very backbone of the church? Who are you to set yourself up against the Archbishop of Weidenbruck?"

"I am a man," replied the deep voice, "and I have a conscience."

"A conscience that rebels against authority," countered the Princess contemptuously, "and you call yourself a good Catholic!"

"I would sooner be a good man than a good Catholic."

"Bah! you talk like a pernicious heretic."

"A daughter should obey her parents," retorted the other; "yet there are things which you would refuse—and rightly—to do at your father's bidding. Man is imperfect, and absolute authority is a thing to be entrusted to few. Because the Archbishop lays down an improper course of action for her Majesty, is it necessary that I should support his erroneous policy by advice which would come from my lips, and my lips alone."

"Miss Anchester, did you ever hear such casuistry?" cried the Princess.

"It's no good appealing to me," came the cool dispassionate tones of the governess, "you see I am only a pernicious heretic."

"But surely your clergy obey their bishops."

"Not invariably," was Miss Anchester's dry but truthful answer. "But I fail to see that you have much to grumble at. If, as you say, the Queen is a good Catholic she will assuredly obey the Archbishop rather than a subordinate."

"The Queen is a deeply religious woman," said the Princess, "she is always having conversations with me of a spiritual nature, and I know that she sets the welfare of her soul above all things. Her instinct is to do right as the Archbishop tells her; but it is hard for her to do her duty with this man always at her elbow advocating his vile theories."

"The vile theories of conjugal fidelity and patriotism," added the bass voice, with a touch of calm scorn.

"Oh, I hate you!" cried the Princess wrathfully.

"Listen," continued the other sternly, "you say it is the Queen's duty to play her husband false, to betray his plans to another who wishes to usurp his throne. Are these things in accordance with your abstract ideas of virtue, or are they justified by some great moral delinquency on the King's part?"

"He is an atheist."

"He is a freethinker who has quarrelled with the Archbishop. His theological views may be regret-

table, but on the subject of his quarrel, far too delicate a matter for your ears, I hold that His Majesty was unquestionably in the right."

"Time-server!"

I heard the impatient stamp of a foot, and the male voice answered with the vibration of rising anger.

"Foolish girl," it cried, "what have you to do with politics? What do you know of the world and its wickedness at your years? Go back to the Marienkastel and pray God on your bended knees to deliver you from the faults of your race, pride, temper and ungovernable ambition."

But the Princess was not to be cowed, and there was a fearless reiteration of the opprobrious epithet, "Time-server!"

I saw my companion's face wrinkle into a smile of infinite amusement. Suddenly I heard steps approaching down the corridor, and without a moment's hesitation the General thrust me into the shadow of a pilaster, and flattened himself against the wall by my side. The approaching individual was the Grand Duke Fritz. His black beard thrust viciously in front of him, his bared white teeth, his gleaming eye and hurried rolling gait presented a picture of unedifying and uncontrollable passion. Without glancing to left or right he made straight for the billiard room and flung open the door.

"Is that cursed priest here?" he demanded, "I've searched the whole Brun-varad for his vulture face—ah! there he is." Obeying the pressure of General Meyer's hand I entered the billiard room with him. The scene that met our gaze might

have been a prearranged tableau, so dramatic was its disposition, so effectively were the figures posed. On one side of the fully-lighted billiard table stood the two ladies, the Princess and the governess, the dark Grimlander and the fair English girl. At the rough threatening intrusion of the Grand Duke they had joined hands with an instinct of mutual support in the face of possible violence. On the other side of the table, his broad back towards us, was the Grand Duke, his whole attitude menacing and furious. Beyond, and facing us, was a tall young man of about five and twenty, dressed in the long black garments of a priest. His forehead was lofty, his cheekbones prominent, his nose high and aquiline. It was a pale, proud face with big flashing eyes and a mouth that seemed readier for scorn and rebuke than comfort or tenderness. Not one of the four noticed our quiet entry.

"Schweinhund," spluttered the Grand Duke, if possible a deadlier insult in Grimland than in other German speaking countries. "You told the King that the Queen and I were listening underneath the Schweigenkammer."

"Your Royal Highness is mistaken," replied the priest calmly, "I gave the King no such information for the simple reason I had no such information to give."

"Liar! you wheedled our plans out of the Queen and then betrayed them."

A faint tinge of colour came into the priest's pale cheeks at this insolent reflection on his professional reticence, but he controlled himself admirably.

"You are wrong," he answered, "and you have only to inquire of her Majesty to prove your error. She made no mention to me of any intention of eaves-dropping beneath the Schweigenkammer."

"Then how was it," demanded the Grand Duke fiercely, "that when with my assistance she had climbed up into the shaft of the zaubertisch, the mechanism of the cursed thing was put in motion and her Majesty caught like a rat in a trap?"

There was a little gasp of astonishment from the Princess at the information conveyed in these words, and a gleam of amusement shone in the priest's eyes. He did not answer however, but merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Was it chance, or was it treachery?" persisted the Grand Duke aggressively.

"Your Royal Highness seems to forget the existence of Providence."

"Providence! Geierfalker, why should Providence help you? The Queen is as often on her knees as you."

"The prayers of a righteous man avail much," quoted the priest scornfully, "the prayers of a treacherous woman are possibly less effective."

The answer was swift and unexpected. Losing the remnant of his self-control the Grand Duke struck the priest a heavy blow with his right fist. The stricken man reeled, but for an instant only. He was a tall man, and the blow which had been meant for his face had only reached his hard lean chest. The light of battle kindled in his eye, and for the moment I feared we were about to witness

an unedifying rough-and-tumble. Then something seemed to check the priest in his counter-attack, and I saw that in the Grand Duke's hand which would have checked any one but a madman—the gleaming barrel of a Grimland army revolver.

“Don't lose your temper Mr. Vulture-priest,” said the Grand Duke, whose calmness had returned suddenly in the face of a possible attack, “I don't want holy blood on my soul.”

“Some things are too foul to be stained,” cried the other bitterly.

“Father, don't kill him!” cried the Princess, who evidently anticipated the worst results from this retort. But the Grand Duke remained with his revolver covering the priest's body, silent and unheeding.

“Your Royal Highness,” said General Meyer in the silence that followed the Princess' interruption. Instantly everyone but the Grand Duke looked at us in open-eyed astonishment.

“Your Royal Highness,” repeated the commander-in-chief in a voice that cut like a knife. At this second address the burly Fritz looked round, and as his gaze fell on the General's sneering face the old look of fury rushed back into his fierce eyes.

“What the devil are you doing here?” he asked dropping the muzzle of his weapon.

The General gave the slightest possible shrug to his shoulders.

“At present absolutely nothing,” he replied, “but I have every intention of having a game of

billiards with Mr. Saunders if you will kindly move to the side of the room."

The Grand Duke glared with unmistakable wrath and some measure of perplexity.

"I suppose you have been listening," he said a length.

"One must be in the fashion."

"Bah! a vulture for a priest, a crow for a commander-in-chief! What a household! Come Mathilde, we will return to the Marienkastel," and with these uncomplimentary metaphors the King's cousin swung out of the room followed by his daughter.

The General was the first to break the silence which followed the withdrawal of the Schattensbergs.

"I should leave Weissheim if I were you, father Bernhard," he said. "It is a healthy enough place for most people, but you are quite exceptional."

"In what way, General?"

"The majority find the bracing air good for the chest," and the commander-in-chief lightly tapped the priest where the Grand Duke had struck him.

"It is my duty to be here," replied the other gravely, "and I trust I am not the one to desert the post which duty has assigned me."

"Especially if the post is a combative one, eh? You should have been a soldier, father, not a priest. I assure you the army of Grimland is badly in want of a little stiffening just at present."

A smile of gratification lightened the priest's

stern features, and bowing formally to us he withdrew.

"Now for billiards, Mr. Saunders," said the General. "I am but a poor performer though a most painstaking and accurate marker. If Miss Anchester will condescend to play with you, she will give you a far better game than a poor duffer like myself."

Miss Anchester shook her head. "I am just going to retire, thank you," she said ; " besides, I should never have the temerity to pit myself against such a splendid player as Mr. Saunders."

"How——" I began, well pleased and wondering how the fact that I had won the 'varsity cue had filtered up to these far regions. Then, as I caught sight of the governess' face, I checked myself. Her expression was not appreciative, it was sarcastic.

CHAPTER V

MY first night's rest at the Brun-varad was a very sleepless one, but I was not foolish enough to attribute this to strange surroundings or a strange bed. As a matter of fact my couch was a large and particularly comfortable one, and on the whole I sleep rather better than usual in an unfamiliar bed-chamber. I ascribed my lack of repose partly to the high exciting air of our lofty plateau, and partly to the strange disturbing thoughts which the events of the evening had given birth to. It was obvious that the palace which sheltered me was the home of a threatened man : that the treason which menaced him was engendered in the bosoms of the highest ; that the heart that of all hearts should have beaten true for him was without a shadow of doubt tainted and utterly corrupt. I thought of King Karl's face when he had caught sight of that tell-tale gown, and a great pity rose in my breast for him. I liked the King. It seemed to me impossible to know him and not to like him. He was so full of spirits, so genial, so boyish, so utterly free from pride of birth or position. His unthinking, unhesitating confidence in myself had welded a bond of loyalty that almost rehabilitated my long-shattered belief in the divine right of kings.

I rose in the morning partially refreshed with short snatches of dream-ridden slumber, keen for the experiences of the day, and revelling in the view of snowclad hills and sky afforded by my double-casemented window.

Coffee and eggs and honey were served in the little pleasant sitting-room reserved for my use, and after I had smoked a pipe and written a letter to my mother I found my way down to the great sumptuous hall which the present monarch had evolved out of a coterie of small and picturesquely inconvenient apartments.

I found my host seated in front of a open fire, in the depths of an enormous armchair. A large meerschaum pipe was between his lips, and he was studying a bundle of papers through thick-rimmed pince-nez. A huge snow-white St. Bernard lay at his feet, and as I approached the great beast rose leisurely to his feet and advanced affably towards me.

"Good-morning, Saunders," said His Majesty, "you slept well I trust."

"Tolerably well, thank you sire," I answered.

"And I intolerably badly," he said, more to himself than to me. "I'm glad the dog likes you," he went on musingly, "he doesn't take to most people. In fact you're rather a surly old beast, aren't you Mogul? By the way, Saunders, I owe you an apology. When I asked you to visit us out here I knew that the subterranean politics of this unhappy land were simmering dangerously—that is their chronic state. But I had no idea things would

come to a crisis as they threaten to do now. You see these papers I am reading? They are General Meyer's report on the military situation and his plans for the disposition of troops in the event of a popular uprising. My good cousin Fritz would give five years of his restless life for five minutes perusal of these dry statistics. Nevertheless," he added with a smile, "I have every reason to suppose that his wish will remain ungratified." And so saying the King threw the whole bundle into the fire, where in a few seconds they were reduced to blackened ashes. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "We shall prepare a spurious report and contrive to get it stolen, or at least surreptitiously copied. The real details are here"—tapping his forehead—"and in a much cleverer brain than mine—my commander-in-chief's."

"Is it not a trifle indiscreet to mention all this to me?" I could not help asking. The King shrugged his shoulders. "I am as discreet as my enemies," he said. "Look at the Grand Duke's behaviour in the billiard room last night, which Meyer has reported to me. Even if he had not known of the General's presence he knew he was speaking before Miss Anchester who is a firm friend of mine. I may not be a particularly cautious person, but compared to me my cousin is rashness personified, and I ask for no clumsier opponent. And after all," he went on with a touch of sadness, "one must trust some one. I have never yet met an Englishman I could not trust."

"Your Majesty's liking for my country and

countrymen is well known," I said. "You must have been fortunate in the specimens you have met."

"English gentlemen are all very much alike," he said. "They are the salt of the earth. To you who have spent all your life in a country where social order and respect for human life are as much taken for granted as the rising of the sun, the condition of affairs here must seem well nigh incredible. The average Grimlander has virtues, I admit—the rough animal virtues of the wolf. He is fond of his offspring, he prefers his own country to any other, and he is amazingly hardy. On the other hand, his respect for human life is lamentably insufficient. For his own it is slight enough, for his neighbour's absolutely non-existent. Pity, honour, industry, application, self-denial, these are words which do not figure in his lexicon. That is the average Grimlander, mind you. The aristocrat is different—he lacks the animal virtues of the wolf."

There was silence at the conclusion of the King's words. No phrase occurred to my mind which would not have seemed impertinent in its sympathy.

"And yet," went on King Karl, after a long pause, "I love my people—because they are my people."

At this point, our conversation was interrupted by the advent of a third party. Advancing towards us across the hall was the figure of a slim young woman. She was wearing a close-fitting woollen jersey, a white beret on her head, a short shirt of dark blue, and a pair of stout boots of which the

toes were garnished with sets of formidable iron spikes. It was several seconds before I recognised in this figure the person of Miss Anchester, the caustic governess to the royal children. She smiled brightly enough on me now.

"You find my get-up very peculiar, I can see, Mr. Saunders," she began.

"I beg your pardon," I returned, conscious of having been staring rather rudely, "I did not recognise you for the moment."

"We all dress like this at Weissheim," she went on. "It is the uniform of the place. These are my tobogganning boots—I hope you admire my rakes."

"They are most rakish," I replied, facetiously, "and are you going down the Kastel run?"

"You'd better go and watch Miss Anchester do the Kastel run," put in the King, "I'm busy this morning with old Meyer, otherwise I would take you on to the curling rink. Miss Anchester, will you be good enough to look after Mr. Saunders till lunch time?"

"With pleasure," replied the governess. "Mr. Saunders, I'm sure, will be delighted to pull my toboggan up the hill."

"How long is the hill?" I asked laughing.

"Oh, about two miles. You look fairly robust."

"I will go and get ready at once," I said, and suiting the action to the word, I mounted the stairs to my room, put on my thickest Swiss boots, a sweater, and a cloth cap, and prepared to sally forth with daringly athletic Miss Anchester.

I shall never forget my first daylight impressions of Weisheim. The thermometer was showing forty degrees of frost, but there was not the slightest sensation of cold in the air. The sun had just climbed above the shoulder of the mighty Klanigberg, and was making his heat felt with no uncertain ray. There was not a cloud in the sky or a breath in the heaven. The earth was white. Mile upon mile, league upon league, as far as the eye could reach, was snow, pure, immaculate, sound-deadening snow. Below us was the deep-fronzen Nonnensee, so covered with the all-present crystals that one distinguished it from the land merely by its smooth, untreed, unrocky surface. Beyond, the huge Klanigberg and her flanking sisters the jagged Eisenbahn and the graceful Traualtar. Half way up their towering sides the bare pines projected starkly from the snow, while above, their gleaming whiteness was flecked with dark crags and clear-cut precipices. To our left lay the town of Weissheim with its dominating church and the big rectangular Pariserhof. Beyond, and far below, lay the small village of Riefinsdorf, its little yellow station easily distinguishable in the clear thin atmosphere. To our right and considerably above us was the Marienkastel, the half-modern, half-ancient home of the Grand Duke, a pink stucco building attached to an old stone tower considerably out of the perpendicular. Above all, the sky, and it seemed as if Nature had taken all colour from the earth and crowded it into one intense terrific blue. It was wonderful, beautiful, marvellously exhilarating.

"Well, and what do you think of Weissheim?" asked my companion.

I had fetched her toboggan out of a shed, and was dragging it easily along the path in the direction of the Marienkastel.

Somehow in her athletic guise, her cheeks glowing healthily in the keen mountain air, she looked quite different from the stately creature of the night before, much more girlish and natural I thought: and she smiled so frankly and pleasantly upon me that I wondered if the prejudices I had formed against her were really as well founded as they had seemed the previous evening. Still, remembering her remarks to me anent tobogganing and nerve, I felt I had a grudge against her.

"It is better than Whitechapel," I replied. I felt sure the remark would annoy her.

"And do you live in Whitechapel?" she asked sweetly.

"No; in South Kensington. Still I prefer this, even to Harrington Gardens."

"But why drag in Whitechapel?" she asked. "I am afraid you were trying to be flippant. Never be flippant when discussing Nature. It is the sign of a small soul."

The presumption of this young lady in lecturing me in this manner was far too amusing to cause offence.

"I mentioned Whitechapel," I said, in smilingly insincere defence, "because we have a small factory there. I am the head of a draper's firm, and we employ a lot of girls there making blouses."

"Oh, I see," returned my companion in all seriousness; "you mentioned Whitechapel because it is familiar to you. How interesting to be head of a draper's business and superintend the working girls!"

"I am afraid I don't do much superintending."

"You are busy in other ways?"

"I am rarely busy at all," I said; "I fear I have not the business instinct."

She stopped abruptly in her walk, and looked at me in undisguised dismay, almost horror.

"You don't take an interest in your business!" she ejaculated.

I could not refrain from laughing.

"You make me feel like a criminal," I said.

"I should think so," she said, melting ever so little; "I had hoped you had one redeeming characteristic."

I ought to have been offended, for our acquaintance hardly warranted this familiarity.

"I am an excellent beast of burden," I protested with a gesture towards the toboggan.

She laughed at that, and then, as if repenting of the concession, made the latter part of her laugh scornful.

"Yes," she said, "you are an excellent beast of burden."

After that we walked on in silence till presently we came across the toboggan track.

"This is the Kastel run," she explained briefly and not without a touch of reverence.

I looked at the track with curiosity. It was

four or five feet wide and the surface was of snow turned into ice by the process of watering. On each side of the course were little banks about a couple of feet high, also of iced snow and hard as iron. The run did not strike me as particularly steep, but the surface was so absolutely slippery that I could well imagine a great rate of speed being attained on it.

Next moment there was a slight scraping sound and an old lady, a Grimlander, came lugeing round the corner. She was a brown-faced, wrinkled old creature, sitting up comfortably on her machine, both feet pressed flat on the surface of the track, and holding a cord in her hand as if she were guiding a horse. In a few minutes she was lost to view round another bend. The pace seemed to me extremely dangerous.

"She goes well," I remarked.

Miss Anchester laughed scornfully.

"She does not mean going too fast," she said.

"Not fast?"

"No: she keeps her feet down. Besides she's riding a 'schlittli.' You can't get up any pace on an old-fashioned thing like a 'schlittli.'"

"And what do you ride?" I asked.

"Oh, I ride a 'skeleton'."

I looked at the toboggan which I was trailing behind me. It was just an open framework of steel runners with a small wooden cross-seat which shifted backwards and forwards like the sliding-seat of a racing boat.

"And is it difficult?" I asked.

"It is easy enough in the straight," was the reply; "the corners take a little negotiating though. Let us walk on a little higher and we shall see a bend—the Devil's elbow."

The quaintly-named bend which we were soon abreast of was remarkable for the alteration in the height of the bank. Instead of being only some two feet high, the exterior boundary of the curve rose abruptly to a height of at least ten feet; and instead of being perpendicular to the track, sloped upwards at an angle of about sixty degrees. The object of this was made manifest directly. A tobogganner was coming down, a man this time, and travelling head-foremost. As he reached the bend his machine dashed up the bank to within a foot of the top, kept at that height for a second, and then sank again into the trough of the course. The pace was absolutely terrific.

"Without that bank," said Miss Anchester, "it would be impossible to get round the corners. Circular bicycling tracks are constructed on the same principle. That was the Grand Duke's son Max. He is a good tobogganner but he takes his banks a trifle high."

"How does one avoid doing so?" I asked.

"It is necessary to dig one's rakes into the ice before coming to a sharp turn. That reduces the pace somewhat, and when you are turning, as here, to the right, you put out your right foot as far as possible and rake hard with it. Also much can be done with the arms, pulling the head of the toboggan round. The penalty for taking the bank too high

is loss of speed. Besides you may go over the top, which in a race is of course fatal."

"And unpleasant at all times," I added. "That I suppose is where the danger comes in."

"There is nothing dangerous in going over the Devil's elbow," replied my companion, "it merely means a drop of ten feet into deep snow. It is an alarming, not to say bumpy, business, but it gives one a very good notion of what flying is like."

"Without however the advantages of wings."

"Precisely, one misses wings badly tobogganning. There is a bend further down the run which is really dangerous. It is a double turn with twin banks called Jonathan and David. If you take Jonathan high you are morally certain to go over David. And if you go over David you are morally certain to fall a thousand feet to the Nonnensee. One avoids taking Jonathan high by judicious raking."

"What would happen if one went down without rakes?" I asked.

Miss Anchester laughed.

"Please don't try," she said. "The thing may be theoretically possible, but it is a practical certainty you would never get down in safety. When you make your first effort on the Kastel run, rake all the way—imagine you are in a broken-down four-wheeler trying to miss a train. Afterwards, as you acquire skill and confidence, rake less and less. The less you touch the ice with your rakes the better time you will do. But beware of David; he is a good friend but a bad enemy."

I looked behind me to try and follow with my

eye the windings of the run. Here and there a steep bank showed where the track curved suddenly, but for the most part it was indistinguishable in the glaring whiteness of the landscape. The sound of firing attracted my attention to a party of tiny soldiers hundreds of feet below shooting at an ice target on the Nonnensee. Half way down the hill-side a couple of men were ski-ing in swift zig-zags among the pine trees. The speed they attained, the ease and grace with which they turned, fascinated me. Presently one of them fell. His pole slipped from his hand, his long comical footgear flourished aloft, a feathery spray of whiteness rose momentarily into the air, and he lay stretched and motionless in the deep snow. At first I feared a minor tragedy, a sprained ankle or a twisted limb, but in a second he was on his feet again brushing the snow from his clothes and glissading smoothly down the steep incline.

The extraordinary beauty of the scene held me. It seemed as if Nature had made of this high valley a huge recreation ground for weary jaded men. It was as if she said ; "Come all ye who work in great stuffy cities, and whose eyes are weary of close pent streets and mudstained pavements. Behold, I will fill your lungs with pure untainted air. I will bound your vision with mountains instead of houses, and your eyes shall rest upon stainless snow. Here you can feel the warmth of a sun whose rays no vapours intercept, no fogs conceal, but which will never oppress you. Here you can sport in the most enjoyable, the most

exhilarating fashion, and in case you fall I have prepared the softest pillows in the world for you to fall on, the spotless pillows of my gleaming snows."

"You still think it is better than Whitechapel?" asked my companion noticing my entranced expression.

"It is a white chapel," I replied, "an immaculate shrine for the worship of Nature."

"Now you are becoming poetical," returned Miss Anchester. "First you are flippant and then you become poetical. I am afraid you have a very unstable mind."

"A stable mind is a perpetual boredom," I remarked. "But if you are going down the Kastel run, had we not better pursue our upward course?"

"Vorwärts, then," said Miss Anchester, and a few minutes later we had reached the starting point of the world-famed run.

We were quite near the Marienkastel now, and its quaint Romanesque tower seemed to lean more than ever from the perpendicular. A high wooden construction stood by, from the summit of which a view of the whole course could be obtained. When a rider was seen to fall a warning bell was rung which was continued till the course was clear. At the base of this tower was a small room where sportsmen stored their toboggans and deposited their superfluous attire, and from which telegraphic messages were exchanged with the Weissheim end of the run. A thin wire was stretched across the track both at the start and at the finish, and by the snapping of these the time of each descent was

automatically registered. When a rider had finished his course an electric bell was rung from the other end, and his time telegraphed up. By no possible chance were two riders ever allowed on the track at the same time.

There were a few men waiting their turn before us. They were dressed in sweaters and high white leggings; they wore thick gauntlets on their hands and stout pads on their knees and elbows. All had boots furnished with sharp iron rakes.

"If you walk down the side of the track," said Miss Anchester, "you will see me pass you long before you get to Weissheim. There is not much amusement in watching the start."

I acted upon this suggestion and marched down again by the path which bordered the Kastel run.

At the Devil's elbow I waited a moment and watched a male performer negotiate the sharp turn. He did not do it at all well, his toboggan skidding sideways down the steep bank, throwing the rider half off on to the hard track. However, he recovered his position with an effort, and after bumping rather severely into the counter-bank, steadied himself and disappeared rapidly from view.

I walked on, and after a few minutes another man passed me. His pace was terrific and he seemed travelling with great skill, but the tense anxiety in his strained eyes seemed to suggest that glory rather than pleasure was the real motive of his descent.

I continued my downward course till I came to

a sharp double bend which I made no doubt was the famous Jonathan and David.

The latter was banked up to a tremendous height, and wisely so, for it was obvious that anyone going over here would have a fearful experience, an almost precipitous drop of many hundred feet.

I decided to wait here to see Miss Anchester's descent, and selected the top of Jonathan as my best point of vantage. I had not long to wait. There was the slight scraping sound of iron runners travelling over smooth ice, and my late companion was in sight.

Down the slope she came, travelling smoothly but at a tremendous speed, straight as an arrow, magnificent in her complete control of her lightning craft. A wisp of fair hair streamed behind her ear, a faint gleam of amusement shone in her grey eyes.

Suddenly I heard the chink of metal on ice, she swerved violently in her course, and the toboggan instead of rising about half way up the bank upon which I was standing, rushed straight towards me. My first impulse was to jump down out of the way, for it is no joke to stand in the path of an erratic tobogganer travelling at the speed of some fifty miles an hour. In the nick of time there flashed back to me some caustic remarks of the governess on the subject of nerve. I stood my ground in apparent fearlessness and as I did so, I read acute distress in Miss Anchester's countenance. Something was wrong, and as she rushed violently towards me her lips framed a breathless "Stop me." The whole time from the moment I had first heard the

sound of her runners till her face was almost level with my feet, was so infinitesimally brief that my mind worked by instinct rather than reasoning. Fortunately the abrupt dash up the steep, high bank had taken off much of her tremendous speed. Leaning over I caught her by the arm and throwing my weight back held her against the inevitable wrench that followed. I felt the muscles of my arms crack, but my feet had good purchase, and for a second we stayed there tottering on the summit of Jonathan. In that second I saw the toboggan slip away from its late rider, dash up David, and disappear over the top into the silent abyss. Then as we rolled back together like children on a hill-side, tumbling at last into a deep soft bed of snow, the bell on the crow's-nest rang out its deep note of warning. Then it was silent again—the course was clear.

I looked at my companion who lay motionless at my side. Her eyes were closed. A letter which had fallen from her pocket lay beside her.

"Miss Anchester," I said as soon as I had regained my breath. There was no answer.

Again I called on her by name. Still there was no answer.

I rose to my knees and gazed at her face. - It was very pale, very statuesque, very beautiful.

Putting the letter which had fallen from her into my own pocket for safety, I picked up a handful of snow and rubbed her temples with it. Almost at once the big grey eyes opened, calmly wondering. Then remembrance lighted in them.

"What a little donkey I've been!" were her first words.

"Something went wrong," I suggested.

"I lost a rake," she said, "look," and I saw that the iron spikes were missing from her right boot.

"Still that was not your fault," I said consolingly.

"No; that was Krabb, the shoemaker's fault. I will talk to him presently. I called myself a donkey because I fainted."

"Surely," I said, "that was a matter beyond your control."

"Precisely; that is why I feel so humiliated. The sudden loss of my rake threw me quite off my balance and I dashed up Jonathan instead of keeping low. I should have gone over David to a certainty if you had not stopped me. I was afraid you would jump out of the way as I rushed at you."

"Your opinion of my nerve was not high?"

"It would have been only natural to have done so. Fortunately for me you did not take the natural course. Had you done so I should now be somewhere on the bosom of the Nonnensee, and my tobogganning career a thing of the past."

The rapid change from insensibility to her normal calmness was remarkable and perhaps admirable. Equally remarkable was the complete absence of any expression of gratitude except the implied commendation in the admission that I had not taken the natural course.

It was a little disappointing, and yet I could not help feeling that that commendation, slight as it

was, was more truly flattering than the spasmodic out-pourings of the average young woman.

"I hope you are not very badly shaken," I said; "I had better perhaps fetch a sleigh to take you home."

"I am perfectly recovered, thank you," was the decided reply, and in another moment she was on her feet brushing the snow from her woollen jersey and short blue skirt.

We trudged along in silence, the governess refusing my arm, following the downward track towards Weissheim.

"I suppose I shall funk David now," said my companion a little bitterly; "I have never funkcd him yet. The only parts of the course I ever approach with any anxiety are the crossings."

"The crossings?"

"Yes, there are two places where the track is crossed. One is near the start, which we call the upper crossing, but which is seldom used. The principal one is just below here, where the Riefinsdorf road crosses the run."

"You mean," I said, "that you are afraid of a sleigh blocking your path as you descend."

"Exactly. It would be terrible, because though one can check one's pace by raking hard, one can no more stop altogether than one could catch a rifle bullet in a butterfly net."

"Cannot one throw oneself off the toboggan?" I asked.

"One might, but it would be of no earthly use. One would go on just the same, only in a rather

more unpleasant fashion. As a matter of fact there is nothing to fear from this crossing. You see that signal post? When that signal is up, as it is now, no sleigh may advance to within a hundred yards of the track. That man there is stationed to enforce the rule in case some impatient driver should disregard it."

Hardly were these words out of Miss Anchester's lips when there came the sound of jingling sleigh-bells. A second later there emerged from the pine-woods a pair-horse sleigh furiously driven by a cockaded coachman, and despite the signal they dashed recklessly past the hundred yards limit. Fortunately there was no tobogganner in sight, but the watchman, true to his duty, made as though to dart at the horses' heads. All of a sudden he stopped, backed to the side of the road, doffed his hat and made a low obeisance.

The carriage contained two ladies. One was the Fräulein von Helder · the other was her Majesty the Queen.

CHAPTER VI

WE sat down to lunch a *partie carrée*, and it was rather depressing. To begin with, the female element was absolutely lacking, the Queen being away and Miss Anchester lunching upstairs with the children. Secondly, we were a small party in a large room, which is never a cheerful circumstance. Thirdly, my companions, to wit the King, General Meyer and young Prince Max were not at their best, socially. We were seated at one end of the *Gastzimmer*, a long narrow room recently built out on the south front of the Palace, with a fine look-out over the valley, and a superfluity of mediocre carving in highly polished pitch-pine.

Prince Max, to whom I was now introduced, was a short but very good-looking boy with a small moustache and an exceedingly pale countenance. He looked bored and a trifle dissipated, but his features, which were exceptionally well-formed, bore a strong likeness to those of his sister.

As I have already remarked it was a depressing meal. The King was obviously worried and absent-minded, and the whole-hearted manner in which he neglected his duties as host rather increased my liking for him. I knew he was in trouble, and had

he pestered me with small attentions, or worse still tried to entertain me with forced gaiety, I should have felt highly uncomfortable.

The commander-in-chief was his usual self; silently critical, sneeringly amused.

Of the young prince I formed an unfavourable opinion. He drank extremely strong whiskies and sodas, and smoked cigarettes (without asking permission) between the courses. Conversation he apparently had none, but he made up for this by gaping elaborately at intervals of every three or four minutes.

After lunch a man brought in letters on a tray. There was one for me from my mother, and there was also a note for the King. "Excuse me, Saunders," said his Majesty opening his missive. "Please read your own letter."

I opened my letter and read the first page and then, looking up, I saw that King Karl's sun-burned features wore a more serious expression than ever. He handed his note to General Meyer who read it without any alteration of his habitual calm.

"Come and talk it over with me in my study," I overheard the King say in a voice little above a whisper, and he and the General rose and left the room.

The result was to leave me face to face with the uncommunicative and world-weary Max.

With a sudden determination to mitigate the ennui of our tête à tête I put back my half-read letter into my pocket and turned to my silent companion.

"It is a magnificent view from here," I began.

He gaped before replying.

"Yes, devilish fine," he said.

"I saw you on the Kastel run this morning," I pursued.

"Indeed. Devilish nearly had a spill at the Devil's elbow. Good fun tobogganning, but it don't do after a late night and an injudicious blending of liqueurs."

"Are you going down again this afternoon?"

"No, I'm playing bridge with some fellows at the Pariserhof. Think I'll be off now. So long."

I bowed slightly and the young prince withdrew yawning from the room. His English was perfect, or rather it was perfectly colloquial, which is not quite the same thing.

I breathed a sigh of relief at his departure, and put my hand into my pocket again for my mother's letter.

I suppose Max's incessant yawnings had infected me with sleepiness, for as I fingered my epistle and turned mechanically to the second page I gaped audibly. Next I discovered that my attention was not concentrated, and that I had read several lines without the slightest comprehension of their purport. Pulling myself together with an effort I proceeded to make a more intelligent perusal of my mother's hand-writing.

"I trust," began the second page, "that you are carrying out my request with success and without undue friction: that you are snubbing my dear,

conceited Robert on every possible and impossible occasion, without regard to the poor youth's feelings or the ordinary dictates of politeness. There is a certain Miss Blackwood, in every way a most desirable young person, whom I am sure he really cares for, and to whom I believe he will ultimately offer his hand and heart, if only you are kind enough to devote your very considerable talents to snubbing his absurd self-importance out of him. I fully realise the ungraciousness of the task I have imposed——”

Great Heavens! Was my mother mad, or had I been so far infected by the yawnings of the pasty-faced Max as to have fallen unwittingly into the land of foolish after-lunch dreams?

I turned to the letter's termination.

“Yours very sincerely

“AUGUSTA SAUNDERS”

I was more puzzled than ever. The only possible suggestion that occurred to me was that my mother had started writing to me, had been interrupted, and had absent-mindedly finished the letter under the impression that she was writing to somebody else. It was not in the least like her, for my mother is clear-headed and precise to a fault, but I could find no better explanation of the mystery. The letter commenced all right, I reflected, and lazily wondering, I returned to the first page.

The first words that met my gaze came as a shock.

“Dear Miss Anchester.”

In a second the solution, or at any rate half the solution dawned on me. It was Miss Anchester's letter that I had been reading, the letter which had fallen from her pocket that morning by the Kastel run, which I had put into my own pocket for safety and had forgotten to return to her. Having read the first page of my own letter I had started hers on the second, under the impression that it was the same epistle.

My first feeling was relief concerning the condition of my mother's mind. The second was a modified self-reproach for my unwitting breach of confidence. Then I began to be mystified again. This second letter was undoubtedly in my mother's handwriting. Had it not been so my mistake could never have occurred. The signature proved the letter's authorship, if proof was necessary, but why in the world was my mother writing to the King of Grimland's governess? I had never to my knowledge met a Miss Anchester at home or even heard my mother mention one.

Slowly and almost automatically the words I had read came back to me. I did not of course glance at the lines again—that would have been dishonourable—but the meaning of meaningless sentences, the explanation of the inexplicable, gradually but comprehensively illuminated my mind. My dear, delightful, interfering parent had written to Miss Anchester, whose acquaintance she had evidently formed under circumstances unknown to myself, asking her to snub me on every possible and impossible occasion, and regardless of the

dictates of ordinary politeness. All was accounted for! The governess' caustic remarks, her unnatural brusqueness (doubtless far more painful to her than to myself) her refusal to thank me adequately for my timely assistance on Jonathan that morning, all were explained.

No doubt she was an ordinary pleasant girl, ready enough to make herself agreeable to a presentable young man, and feeling acutely the false ungirlish position into which my mother's well-meant bungling had forced her. How we would laugh over the incident later on when I had explained matters to her, and how she would apologise for her unnatural acerbities and presumptuous lecturings. Well, I had the whip hand of her now, and as I was strong I would be merciful, for on physical grounds I was disposed to approve of her. Then I laughed aloud. It was so exactly like my mother to fancy I was in love with the Blackwood girl, simply because in one evening I had danced a waltz and a two-step with her.

"Pretty little Agatha Blackwood," I said out loud, "you are very attractive, very dainty, and you have the soul of a butterfly."

"Isn't Max here?"

I looked up somewhat startled and saw the King standing in the doorway with General Meyer just behind him.

"Isn't Max here?" repeated his Majesty. "I thought I heard you talking with somebody."

I rose abashed.

"I'm afraid I was talking to myself, sire."

"The soliloquy," remarked the General, "sounded highly poetic as far as I heard it."

"It was concerning a very charming woman with whom I have not the felicity of being in love," I replied.

"Where is Max?" asked the King abruptly.

"He said something about bridge at the Pariserhof, sire."

"Saunders," continued the King, laying a hand on my shoulder, "would you care to do me a service?"

"Immensely, sire."

"You have no plans for this afternoon?"

"None whatever."

"I wish you would drive over to Heldersburg for me, and bring back the Queen."

"It sounds simple enough," put in the General, "but in reality the betting is against your carrying out the King's wishes."

Considerably mystified, I turned to King Karl.

"It is necessary," he said gravely, "that we should take you into our full confidence. The Queen, to put it bluntly, has bolted. This morning we had a royal quarrel, which as far as I know, is very like any other sort of quarrel. I reproached her with disloyalty to myself, with conspiring with the Grand Duke Fritz to oust me from the throne, and in particular with having striven to overhear our secret plans from the shaft of the Zaubertisch. Now had she been as guilty as I pretended to think, I should have refrained from these accusations. The time for speech would have passed, and the time for action have commenced. My wife, so far, has only played

at treason, but the game is a dangerously fascinating one. She is theatrical, restless, inordinately vain, and unfortunately she is afflicted with a husband who is singularly unfitted by nature for dealing with a woman of her particular temperament. In our disputes I am invariably calm instead of violent, which irritates instead of overaweing her. She neither respects, fears, nor loves me, and the only reason that prevents her from going over openly to the enemy is that at the bottom of her miserable little heart she is a coward." The King paused. "Do I make myself plain?" he added.

"You are frankness itself, sire," I replied truthfully, and marvelling at his extraordinary outspokenness.

"I know," he went on, "that in England it is not considered gentlemanly for a man to condemn his wife openly, however culpable she may be; but this Grimland of ours is a rough half-barbarous country, and I have never yet cultivated the art of reticence. But to come back to our subject, I accused the Queen of treason because I wanted a disclaimer; I wished her to produce some explanation of her questionable conduct. The result was not what I desired. She merely flew into a violent passion and dashed out of the room, and my latest information is that she has fled with the Fräulein von Helder to the latter's home at Heldersburg. Now the question that arises is whether I shall make this flight the occasion of a definite rupture, or strive to smooth things over and induce her Majesty to return. My instinct inclines to the

latter course, for a definite rupture with the Queen would mean a big accretion to the forces of disloyalty. Public sympathy would be on her side not mine, and the probable result would be to precipitate a general uprising of the discontented and disorderly in favour of the popular and amiable Fritz. Now in my opinion, prevention is better than cure. We could deal, successfully I believe, with a revolt, and a storm would undoubtedly clear the air. All the same, as a man of forty with a superabundance of adipose tissue, I dislike storms. I prefer the air to cool gradually without any violent atmospheric disturbances. That is why I am asking you to fetch the Queen back from Heldersburg. At present no irrevocable step has been taken. The von Helders are neutral, neither hot nor cold. The particular member of that noble family who has the honour of being my wife's companion, has the face of a pig and the mind of a pig. She adores the Queen, who bullies her disgracefully, but apart from this misplaced affection, her thoughts, I should fancy, seldom wander far from the fascinating subject of her bodily nutriment. From the von Helders therefore you will meet with little opposition. What is important is that my unstable spouse does not go over hand and glove to the Schattensbergs, and to prevent this undesirable eventuality I must ask you to employ all the means at your disposal to induce Her Majesty to return at once to Weissheim."

"All the means at my disposal!" I could not help repeating, "what are they, sire?"

"I selected you for this delicate mission," resumed the King, ignoring my question, "because I know no one else so likely to bring it to a successful conclusion. If I sent Meyer with a battalion of Guards, she would resist, because the idea of being forced to return under military escort would appeal to her theatrical temperament. She would become a martyr: the Brun-varad would be surrounded by a howling mob, the Marienkastel by a cheering one. If I went to fetch her myself the result would be a fore-doomed failure, for I act on her Majesty like a red rag on a bull. You, she neither likes nor dislikes; she may listen to you or she may not. Anyway, I am convinced you are the most likely man in Weissheim to bring about the Queen's return."

"But why——"

"The fact is," interposed General Meyer, "His Majesty considers you have a lucky face. Square-chinned men have a singular habit of achieving success in life, and success as we know is invariably the outcome of luck. You have a lucky face."

"When shall I start?" I inquired of his Majesty.

"In half an hour if you will be good enough. There will be a royal sleigh awaiting you at the Siegersthor. I am very much your debtor. Oh, one moment. I do not suppose there is any danger connected with your mission, but should you perceive any, turn back. The Queen's return here is desirable, but it is not worth risking an honest man's life for."

CHAPTER VII

AT three o'clock I entered the royal sleigh which was waiting for me at the imposing Victor's gate, the great archway at the base of the Waffenthurm.

It was a magnificent afternoon. The sun shone with even greater power than it had displayed in the morning, the sky was, if possible, a deeper blue.

There are not many roads open in winter in Grimland, but the Heldersburg road is the highway to Austria, and when a fall of snow comes they drive a team of horses trailing great logs of wood behind them to roll the freshly fallen crystals into a firm compact mass.

It was a lovely drive, down the hill past Riefinsdorf and away to the left, at first between villas and small hotels, each with its covering of snow and fringe of glistening ice daggers; and then between pine woods and half-concealed boulders, with glimpses of frozen waterfalls, and in the background dazzling summits and the amazingly blue sky.

The buntings twittered cheerily over head, and my heart sang back to them. "Surely if there is a Paradise, it is here, it is here," was the familiar refrain that rang involuntarily in my head. Doubtless the object of my drive was largely responsible

for my unwonted exhilaration of spirit. The fact that the King had chosen me for this delicate mission was flattering to a degree. The romance of the situation and the slight possibility of danger roused my enthusiasm quite as much as the bracing air or the unmatched glory of the scene.

I had travelled but a little way beyond Riefinsdorf when my sleigh pulled up abruptly. Impregnated as my mind was with fancies of a dramatic and adventurous nature, I quite expected to find a band of ruffians, armed to the teeth, disputing our path and demanding instant submission. What I actually saw was a young lady standing in the middle of the road, and an enormously long, heavy-looking toboggan at right angles to our course and completely blocking our progress.

The young lady, who looked very charming and was attired much as my companion of the morning, brightened visibly as her eyes lighted upon me. It was the Grand Duke's daughter, the Prinzessin Mathilde.

"Oh, Mr. Saunders," she cried, "is that you?"

"I have every reason to believe so," I replied, jumping out of my conveyance. "Can I be of any assistance to you?"

"You might be," she replied reflectively. "Where are you going to?"

"I am out for a drive."

"So I perceive."

"To Heldersburg," I supplemented.

"Oh. I wish you would come bob-sleighing with us."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about bob-sleighing."

"That does not matter in the least. Max and a couple of men will be here directly. I steer and Max 'brakes,' and all you have to do is to sit behind me and lean over a bit when we come to the corners. It's really very pleasant."

"It sounds delicious. Unfortunately I am taking a message to Heldersburg for the King."

"Can't the coachman take it?"

"Please don't tempt me," I replied. "The idea of bob-sleighing fascinates me enormously, but duty is duty, and I have not the honour of being King's messenger every day of my life."

"You might at least have one run with us," persisted the Princess. Her importunity was flattering, but I had taken my mission very seriously, and was determined not to be seduced from the path of duty by siren blandishments, however innocuously meant.

"I fear not," I replied, shaking my head sadly. "I could not love bob-sleighing half so much loved I not honour more. But how comes it that you are here by yourself blocking the free way with this derelict craft?"

"We've just had a run down from Weissheim," she explained. "We are waiting here for a horse to lug the old 'bob' back again for another run. As the horse hasn't turned up, Max and his friends are doing a little ski-ing down the snow slopes."

"You won't mind my gently shifting the 'old bob' out of the way, will you?"

"I shall be highly offended," was the laughing response. "I think it is most disagreeable of you not to join our party. Do think better of it and let the coachman take your stupid message to Heldersburg."

"You are a descendant of Eve and a wicked temptress," I replied. "And as I am a descendant of Adam and a frail man, I shall not risk parleying with you any further," and seizing hold of the "bob's" steering gear, I proceeded to pull the obstructing conveyance to the side of the roadway.

"Remember I am very much offended with you," persisted the Princess.

"And I with you," I retorted. "I was enjoying my drive immensely till you rendered it tame and commonplace with your alluring suggestions of bob-sleighing," and raising my cap I re-entered my sleigh and bade the coachman drive on.

I watched the Princess mischievously snatch up a handful of snow to throw after me ; but snowballs are not easy things to make with the temperature standing below zero, and a mere harmless, powdery cloud of white was all the result of her wicked machinations.

What a jolly little girl ! I thought. How natural and unaffected ! How delightfully free from stupid shyness and stupider pride of position ! And as my sleighbells tinkled, and the turns of the road continually revealed fresh glimpses of winter beauty, I let my mind dwell pleasantly on the charming characteristics, physical and otherwise, of the sunburned, sport-loving little Schattenberg. I

looked forward to seeing her a good deal during my stay at Weissheim. After the unpleasant atmosphere of sordid squabbling, of subversive intrigue, and deep-schemed counter-plotting which impregnated the Brun-varad, her cheerful, thoughtless, joyous little presence had all the refreshment of the clear, pine-laden mountain air. I even began to be mildly philosophic, wondering why Nature sends to scheming, selfish fathers, delightful, unaffected daughters full of frank, natural, innocent joy in life and without the slightest capacity for an evil thought or an unkind action.

Unhappily meditations even of a mildly rapturous nature must come to an end some time, and mine were rudely interrupted by a second stoppage of the royal sleigh.

My previous romantic expectations would not have been so out of place on this occasion, for the road was blocked by some dozen soldiers of the guard. Shod with skis and armed with rifles, they were drawn up in a straggling, menacing line across the road. Their uniforms were of dark green with black facings; they wore high white leggings, and on their heads scarlet berets. They were fine, active-looking men, deeply sunburned and distinctly picturesque in their workman-like uniform. One of them, a sergeant, blew a whistle.

"What's the matter?" I demanded of my red-bearded driver.

"He says we must not proceed, Excellency."

"Why not?" I inquired.

I got no more information than was conveyed by

a shrug of extremely broad shoulders. Suddenly I discerned on my right a further party of half a dozen men ski-ing down the hillside towards us. They approached us at great speed and with alarming directness. Just when I imagined a collision to be inevitable they turned their skis sideways and jumped down into the road in front of our horses' heads.

An officer, whom I now perceived to be Max, approached.

He looked very well in his smart uniform, and the quick rush through the air had lent a tinge of colour to his pale cheeks.

"Why are we stopped?" I began.

"We are carrying out some important manœuvres," was the reply; "we have fixed some dummies up on road further on and we are firing at them from across the ravine. I am sorry to interrupt your drive, but I cannot permit you to go on, it would not be safe."

"I am going to Heldersburg with a message from the King."

Max remained silent for a moment.

"Kindly show me your message," he said at length.

"It is a verbal message," I replied.

"Have you no written order authorizing your journey?"

"I have nothing but my word."

"I'm very sorry," said the young prince gaping, "but my orders are positive. We are to permit no vehicles or passengers along the Heldersburg

road this afternoon. Had you a written authority from his Majesty, I should, of course, give way."

His tone was palpably insincere and I began to feel annoyed.

"Are the manœuvres being held by his Majesty's special command?" I enquired.

"Really," replied Max sarcastically, "I cannot discuss my authority with every one who wants to pass this way. You must go back, my good friend, and if the matter is so extremely urgent get your permit from the King and try again."

"I may not be able to find His Majesty," I objected.

Max laughed

"You may not," he said, "in fact, if my information is correct, he is gone with a ski-ing party across the Nonnensee to the lower slopes of the Klanigberg."

I had the greatest difficulty in controlling my temper.

"Look here, Prince," I said. "I cannot tell you what my message is, but I give you my word of honour it is an important one. If the King learns that I have been stopped he will be very angry."

"And if my father learns that I have neglected my instructions and let you pass, *he* will be very angry. I would sooner face the King's wrath than my father's. No, man, it's no use. It's better to accept the inevitable and go back, than be potted at by the best shots in Grimland."

I looked at the group of soldiers who blocked

the way. They held their rifles threateningly, and their maliciously grinning faces seemed to my imagination to invite the requisite permission to riddle us with bullets. My coachman sat stiffly on his box, but I noticed that his fingers fumbled nervously with the reins as if his mind was ill at ease.

"Very well," I said as calmly as I could, "I accept the inevitable. Coachman, turn round and drive back to Weissheim."

The command was obeyed with an alacrity that bespoke extreme relief. I had a vision of Max's pale sneering face, of half a dozen rifle barrels levelled playfully but regretfully at our heads, and my sleigh swung rapidly on its course in the direction opposite to Heldersburg. I was angry, disappointed, and not a little humiliated. After the flattering way in which I had been chosen for this mission it was most annoying to be checkmated in such unanswerable fashion. Without a doubt the Schattenbergs knew all about the Queen's departure and were determined, as far as in them lay, to render the rupture permanent. But what of the Princess' invitation to bob-sleigh? Was she too playing her part in the revolutionary and aggressive schemes of the Grand Duke Fritz? Was her attempt to decoy me from the path of duty a mere coincidence or the result of definite instructions from her ambitious parent? I recalled her interview with Father Bernhard on the previous evening, and alas! unflattering to my self esteem as was the conclusion, I could only believe that her strongly pressed

invitation was due rather to the exigences of intrigue than a frank girlish desire for the company of a passably interesting young Englishman. And yet I found it impossible to be angry with her. If she had merely been carrying out the Grand Duke's behests it was obvious that the part she had been assigned was one that suited her own inclinations: that her conduct had been less a deliberate piece of acting than a judicious adaptation of her natural instincts to the requirements of her father's policy. Anyway, she was a charming little girl, and I felt that she and I, however antagonistic our parts might be, would play them with good nature, good feeling, and with a strong appreciation of the humorous. I smiled despite myself, as I thought of her snowballing efforts, and then as I remembered Max's sneering countenance and intolerable manner I frowned again and I fear, swore.

"Coachman," I cried, as we emerged from the pine forest upon the outskirts of Riefinsdorf, "is there any other way to Heldersburg?"

"Your Excellency might go across the hills on skis."

"I know nothing about ski-ing. Is there no other track?"

"There is a path open through the wood—the Wald-promenade."

"I will take that then," I said. "Where can I get into it?"

"It starts from the road a few hundred yards back. There is a signpost and your Excellency cannot possibly miss it: nevertheless, I would respect-

fully advise your Excellency to let me drive him back to Weissheim."

"Why?"

"Because there will be a detachment of soldiers on the Wald-promenade just as there is on the road, and our soldiers are not the most patient people in the world."

"All the same I shall make the attempt," I said. "His Majesty considers me a lucky man and I must live up to my reputation."

So saying I descended from the sleigh, and bidding the fellow drive back to the Brun-varad, retraced my tracks till I came to the commencement of the Waldpromenade. The path starting with a sharp ascent plunged boldly into the heart of the pine woods, but I had hardly gone a hundred yards before I came to a halt. A seat was placed invitingly at the edge of the path, and I took advantage of it, not from a desire to rest, but solely for purposes to meditation. To go on was to incur a certain rebuff and perhaps worse. To make a detour through the deep snow was an utter impossibility. Had I possessed a pair of skis and the ability to use them I would have chanced evading the soldiery who were doubtless watching the hill sides, and made a dash for Heldersburg. I was just beginning to despair of a satisfactory solution when my attention was attracted by a strange figure approaching me from the direction of Riefinsdorf. It was a remarkably curious figure too, when I came to appreciate the details. The man—I gathered it was ^{was} a man—was covered from neck to foot with a long fur coat

of a coarse and tremendously shaggy nature. On his head he wore a dirty white woollen cap, a curious article of attire so constructed as to pull down over his entire head, leaving a small aperture for his eyes and nose, and giving the appearance of a mediaeval helmet with the visor up. The small portion of his countenance left uncovered by this serviceable headgear was reduced to a minimum by a large pair of blue glass spectacles, and between these loomed a nose of ample proportions and aggressive colouring. In his right hand he carried a long iron-shod pole, and on his back a basket containing a crowded, high-piled mass of tins. He walked slowly and with a pronounced limp. As he drew nearer, he bade me a gruff good-day.

"One moment, my fellow," I called. He halted.

"Who are you?" I pursued.

"I am Peter," he replied. "Lame Peter of Riefinsdorf."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Himmel und Kaiserfleisch!" he grunted, "am I in a hurry? Is it any use my being in a hurry—me, Lame Peter with the frost-bitten toes?"

"I only asked," I said, "because I wanted to chat with you. Where are you going to?"

"I am going to Heldersburg, Excellency, to sell tinned tomatoes and tinned beans, and maybe a little canned pineapple."

"And do you go there every day?"

"Every day, Excellency, and always at this hour. The train brings tinned fruits and vegetables to Riefinsdorf, and I take them on foot to Heldersburg."

"And are you well known hereabouts?"

"Every one knows Lame Peter, Excellency."

"Good," I said. "Now tell me, how much do you expect to get for your load?"

"Twenty florins—perhaps twenty-two. The profit is not large."

"Good," I said again, "I will give you twenty-two, but that must include the loan of your basket for the afternoon."

"Excellency!"

"Also I desire the loan of your coat and your beautiful woollen cap. How much shall we say for these? Five florins should, I think, be ample."

"Excellency!"

"Come, I will pay at once and you shall have the things back to-morrow morning. Put down your load and take off your coat and cap."

The man obeyed me with jerky rheumatic movements and the furtive air of one dealing with a possibly dangerous lunatic.

"Now for your staff and blue spectacles," I said.

"I can walk but ill without my staff, Excellency, and without my glasses the strong sunshine on the snow pains my eyes exceedingly."

"Nonsense," I said, producing my money, "you can manage to crawl back to the Drei Kronen and solace your eyes with the sight of a bierkanne. There's thirty florins for you, on condition that you go back to Riefinsdorf and drink my health nobly. Come, I will take care that your things are returned to you in plenty of time for your journey to-morrow."

"A thousand thanks, Excellency. You will not forget — Lame Peter of the Kuhgasse, Riefinsdorf. Your Excellency is English?"

"Yes," I replied, donning the lame one's garments, "I am English, and therefore rich, mad, and scrupulously honest. You need have no anxiety for your possessions."

"I have no fear," he grunted, helping me to strap on the basket of tins. "Teufelchen, but it is cold without a coat. I shall certainly take your Excellency's advice and visit the Drei Kronen. Good-day, Excellency, and a thousand thanks."

So saying the old fellow hobbled away in one direction while I advanced in the other towards the home of the von Helders.

Clad as I was, and carrying on my back the basket of tinned provisions, I made no doubt that I could pass, unchallenged, for the lame pedlar. The only uncovered portion of my countenance was my nose, and though this was in several respects inferior to that of my late companion, I trusted that in the friendly shade of the pine forest its deficiencies would pass unnoticed. Realising that any turn of the path might land me in the midst of the watchful soldiery, I walked but slowly, mimicking as well as I could the halting gait of the frost-bitten Peter.

It was fortunate I did so, for a detachment of guardsmen had been stationed at a sharp bend of the track, and it would certainly have been too late to alter my manner of progression before I was among them. As it was my arrival provoked

but a momentary excitement. There was a sharp "Who goes there?" and then almost before I had time to reply they fell aside. "It's only old Lame Peter," they said, and with a gruff "good-day, little soldiers," I passed unmolested through their midst.

Sitting on a boulder and swinging his short legs was no less a person than the Grand Duke Fritz, attired in his colonel's uniform, and holding a big, drooping meerschaum pipe between his teeth.

"Good-day, Lame Peter," he called out, removing his pipe from his mouth.

"Good-day, Highness," I replied making a rheumatic gesture of salute. He nodded cheerily and I saw his white teeth gleam white against the thick black beard and moustaches as his lips parted in a broad good-natured smile, and with an incipient comprehension of the Grand Duke's popularity I walked lamely and unhurriedly on. The incident was over so quickly, so satisfactorily, that I could hardly realize that I had probably been risking my life on the accuracy of a disguise. One thing, at any rate, was evident, namely that the tale of firing across the ravine at dummies on the road was an undiluted fiction, and that any one might go to Heldersburg provided there was no fear of his being an emissary to the royal fugitive.

Now that the critical moment was past I walked on rather more rapidly, and after a while the path brought me down to the main road again. There was not a soul to be seen, but below me in the valley lay the little village of Heldersburg, with its white-roofed, close packed houses, and its tall, quaintly-

steepled church tower. Outside the village, and commanding a small eminence was the Schloss, a brown, rectangular building, old, gaunt and unadorned, a stubborn relic of mediaeval Grimland, and to those gloomy walls, the ancestral home of the von Helders, I made my limping way. Down the long winding road I marched, past the church, through the narrow streets, and as I went the people all saluted me with a kindly "Good-day, Lame Peter."

Some wanted to buy my wares, but I told them curtly that I had an order from the castle and walked on. Slowly I climbed the hill to the Schloss, and passing through the open gateway of the drive, boldly rang the castle bell.

The door was opened by a woman of mature years and more than ample proportions. She looked untidy, good-natured, and palpably over-nourished; and doubtless she was so, for the von Helders had liberal ideas of the alimentary needs of humanity.

"What are you doing here, Lame Peter?" she asked, with an attempt at severity, "why don't you take those things round to the back?"

"I want to see the Queen," I replied.

The good woman's fat cheeks dimpled into a beatific smile.

"You want to see the Queen!" she ejaculated casting her little eyes to the ceiling. "How many seidles of beer have you emptied at the Drei Kronen before leaving Riefinsdorf? Want to see the Queen indeed!"

"You are labouring under a delusion, my good woman," I said calmly. "I am not Lame Peter,

but a certain Herr Saunders, who has a message for her Majesty from the King. Be so kind as to inform the Queen of my desire for an audience."

The look of astonishment on my companion's face melted into one of cunning incredulity.

I removed my blue spectacles and woollen cap.

"Now," I said, "are you satisfied that it is not *Lame Peter* who speaks with you?"

"*Potztausend!* Excellency, I make my very humble apology. I will take your message to her Majesty at once: but I do not think she will see anyone."

She was about to close the door in my face, but I stepped inside and set down my staff and basket, and removed my shaggy overcoat.

The hall in which I found myself reminded me of the *Schweigenkammer*, in that the walls were entirely covered with dark pine panelling, and the ceiling inlaid with diversely and beautifully coloured woods. It was a lofty, handsome apartment, a trifle sombre perhaps with its dark colouring and small, heavily barred windows; but full of the indescribable dignity which comes from good proportion alone, and which is so conspicuously lacking in the majority of modern dwellings.

The stout lady mounted the broad staircase and after a few minutes returned breathless and shaking her head.

"Her Majesty is resting," she said, "she refuses to see any one."

"It is entirely in her Majesty's own interests that I am here," I said, with intentional distinctness.

"It would be a thousand pities, from *her* point of view, if she sent me back without an audience."

The good woman looked puzzled.

"Why?" she asked at length in a wheedling voice.

"Because," I said, raising my voice still louder, "I have a most important message from his Majesty to deliver to her. If she does not get it the consequences may be serious."

"For her Majesty?"

"Hush!" I said in a stage whisper. "I did not say that."

"Tell me the message," said my companion invitingly, proffering a fleshy ear for my confidences. "I will guarantee to take it to her Majesty."

"Impossible," I said. "What I have to say is for the Queen's ear alone. If you are her faithful servant, go back and tell her that Herr Saunders begs her to reconsider her decision—in *her own interest*."

"I am devoted to her Majesty, Excellency; but she has a temper, a most energetic temper. However, if your Excellency——" A voice broke in from above—a harsh female voice:

"Take the gentleman into the library, Kreifel. I will be down in a few minutes."

I had gained my point: the Queen would see me. What I was going to say to her I had not, so far, the faintest idea, and the more I racked my brains the hazier grew my notions.

I looked round me, but could draw no inspiration from the dark book-shelves with their recondite

theological works, their musty histories, and pseudo-scientific treatises on medicine and zoology. I looked vaguely at the heavy stone mantel-piece with its coarse supporting nudities—ancestral von Helders surely—and its pompous flamboyant coat of arms. I glanced at the heavily-barred, heavily-mullioned window, at the old comfortless furniture, at the faded curtains, at the antique porcelain stove, and I received an impression of a grandeur that had departed, and which at its best had never been very refined; but for the life of me I could not extract one idea as to what I was going to say to the Queen of Grimland.

The door opened and a little woman in a blue tea-gown advanced towards me. It was the Queen.

I bowed. She offered me a heavily-ringed hand and motioned me to a chair.

"What is this message the King sends me?" she began.

She was pale but composed, and to my fancy, was ready to fly into a violent temper if she thought I was likely to be cowed thereby.

"His Majesty desires you to return instantly to the Brun-varad," I replied firmly.

She opened her eyes wide. "Is that all?" she asked.

"That is the sum and substance of the message," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"But—I overheard you talking with Kreifel in the hall. You spoke of its being in my interest to receive you. You hinted that the matter was one of overwhelming importance—that it would be

most unwise of me to send you away without an audience."

"I spoke what I thought," I replied. "His Majesty considers it most important that you should return to Weissheim without delay."

She smiled scornfully.

"And did he so far take you into his confidence as to give any particular reason why my return was so extremely desirable?"

"He did," I replied gravely. "He spoke of weighty political reasons which rendered your absence from the Brun-varad most undesirable at the present time. He also said that if you returned immediately he would consider any griveances he might hold against you cancelled—that he was prepared to forgive everything."

At this rather daring statement of mine the Queen rose hurriedly from her chair, her eyes flashing, her little hands clenched, and advanced wrathfully towards me. I sat where I was, outwardly calm, and meeting her gaze unflinchingly.

Suddenly her manner altered and she broke into a peal of mocking laughter.

"He said he would forgive me everything?" she repeated.

"He pledged his word of honour," I affirmed.

"Well, Mr. Saunders," she said bitterly, "go and tell your friend the King, that I am not in any particular need of his forgiveness; that I am very comfortable at Heldersburg; and that I shall return to the Brun-varad at my own convenience—which may be a week hence or may be a fortnight."

"His Majesty will be very disappointed."

She laughed again.

"His Majesty will get over his disappointment," she said. "There are feminine attractions enough at Weissheim without me. There is his precious governess, Miss——"

"Your Majesty!"

"Don't lose your temper, Mr. Saunders. Kings are not invariably models of virtue, and dear Karl is quite capable of making a fool of himself. Forgive me! did he say? He did not perchance ask me to forgive him?"

"There is no such request in his message," I replied drily.

"Bah!" she cried angrily. "I am sick of his canting hypocrisy. You have had my answer; kindly convey it to him word for word."

Things were going badly but I refused to accept defeat without a further effort.

"I fear he will not consider your answer final," I remarked.

"I don't care that"—she snapped her fingers vulgarly—"whether he considers it final or not."

"Your Majesty does not quite comprehend my meaning," I threw a little mystery into my tone and was rewarded by a passing gleam of apprehension in the Queen's eyes.

"Then kindly make your meaning clear."

"I mean," I said, "that his Majesty is *determined* that you should return at once to Weissheim."

"He will use force? He will send a regiment of

soldiers here to fetch me ? ” and there was an ill-concealed eagerness in her tone.

I remembered what the King had said on this subject, and his remarks about his wife’s theatrical instincts.

“ He would certainly not do so—by day,” I replied.

“ He would send and fetch me by force at night !
The coward ! ”

I hung my head.

“ I did not say so,” I muttered.

“ Nonsense,” she cried, “ I can read you like a book. He said he would send and seize me by night. And what did he say he would do then ? ”

I hesitated intentionally.

“ His Majesty was very angry,” I said at length.

“ What did he say he would do ? ” she almost screamed at me.

“ His Majesty was very angry,” I repeated. “ He said things which he doubtless did not mean. I would rather, with your Majesty’s permission, restrain from repeating them.”

She was genuinely alarmed now. There was no misreading the frightened glare in her eyes or the nervous plucking of her tiny fingers at the lace border of the blue tea-gown.

“ You have not my permission,” she said breathlessly. “ I command you to speak. What did he say ? ”

“ His Majesty was very angry——”

“ You’ve said that three times,” she screamed.

“ It appears,” I went on, undismayed, “ that you overheard a private conversation of his Majesty’s

in the Schweigend-kammer by concealing yourself in the shaft of the Zaubertisch——”

“Go on.”

“His Majesty was very—This annoyed his Majesty exceedingly. He said ‘If she plays me any more pranks like this, Saunders, I shall put her in the shaft of the Zaubertisch, and leave her there for a day or two.’ Doubtless his Majesty, who is a most humane man, did not really——”

“Stop,” she cried, one hand raised dramatically aloft and the other pressed against her heart. “I have heard enough. He is a monster, an inhuman monster. He would fetch me by night—by night mind you, so that the people should not see his poor tyrannised wife—and starve me to death in that miserable funnel—Heavens! it’s too horrible to think of.”

“Do not think of it,” I said soothingly. “Think rather of his Majesty’s promise to let bygones be bygones if you return at once.”

“I don’t understand it at all,” she went on in distressed perplexity. “The King must have been very angry—he is not what I call a strong man.”

“He is not,” I admitted confidentially, “and therefore all the more dangerous. When a weak man is thoroughly moved he is sure to fly to the extreme of violence. Believe me, in pressing you to comply with this request I considered I was acting in your interest quite as much as the King’s.”

She looked at me curiously.

“Why should you consider my interests at all?” she inquired.

"It is impossible to know your Majesty and not desire to serve you."

"You are a courtier," she said, smiling in obvious pleasure.

"I am a man."

"Well, I will come. Ah Mr. Saunders, if you know the misery I endure mated to this weak, pleasure-loving monarch, you would pity me. A woman needs a man for a husband, not a brainless, jibing buffoon."

"You have my sincerest sympathy."

"Yes I will come," she went on, "because it is my duty. Karl is my husband and he requires my presence at Weissheim. Little consideration though he deserves at my hands he shall have one more chance. As a patriotic Grimlander I desire peace and tranquillity for my country—but let him beware. The sceptre is slipping from his grasp and a stronger than he is ready to seize it. The country needs a firm ruler not an inconstant flippant fool; a man of strong moral fibre, not a scoffer who treats all things from religion to the revolutionary efforts of his enemies as an amusing jest."

"You are perfectly right," I said. "His Majesty needs a great deal of moral stiffening, and if there is one person in the world capable of giving it him, it is you."

"Oh I have tried and tried," she exclaimed, "till I am sick of it all. I will make one more effort to brace his sluggish spirit, and if I fail, well—the deluge will come, that is all."

"Your Majesty has a noble soul," I murmured.

“ Ah, you understand me,” she cried, well-pleased ;
“ it is pleasant to be understood—especially when
one is not used to it. I will give orders for a sleigh
to be ready in half an hour. Fräulein von Helder
will accompany me. Cannot I give you a seat too ? ”

“ I should esteem it a proud privilege.”

CHAPTER VIII

DURING my half hour's wait in the Castle Library I was the prey to what novelists call mixed emotions. To begin with, I was elated at the success of my mission. I felt that I had acted up to the flattering estimate of my ability which the King must have formed in order to entrust this delicate service into my hands. On the other hand I was not quite comfortable in my mind as to the rectitude of the means I had employed in achieving the desired conclusion. I had pledged the King's word of honour that on his wife's immediate return he would forgive and forget her questionable behaviour—which I had not the slightest right to do. I had put into his Majesty's mouth the most horrible threats, of which he was quite incapable, and for which sooner or later his fiery spouse would inevitably demand an explanation. Thirdly—and this was the most serious of my delinquencies—I had, in order to insure my success, adopted towards her Majesty a tone of veiled sentimentality. She was a vain, foolish woman, and to her foolish vanity I had deemed myself justified in appealing. My success had been rapid and remarkable and I only prayed that my doubtful methods

might not recoil on my own head. She had accepted my rôle as the humble but ardent admirer. What an appalling thing if she started encouraging me ! To be wooed by a Queen—a married Queen—was fascinating in theory and in theory alone. Then I thought of poor old Karl—for I could not help regarding him more as a personal friend than a monarch. If ever there was an “*homme incompris*” it was he. Because he was calm in the face of provocation, the Queen thought him weak. Because he looked at life through humorous spectacles, she thought him insincere and a buffoon. His love of sport and his taste for gaiety were in her eyes but symptoms of an inconstant, pleasure-loving disposition. It was true of course, that in his way, he was just as bad a husband as she a wife. But that was entirely the fault of his temperament. Most women would have cared for him. He was humorous, good-natured, and better still, good-hearted. He was a devoted, romping father, an indefatigable worker as he was an untiring sportsman. Unfortunately he had married one of those women who justified the bracketing of the sex with the dog and the walnut tree in the popular adage. Had he bullied his wife, she would have respected him ; she would quite conceivably have loved him. Anyway, I reflected, they were an ill-assorted couple, and my sympathies, three-fourths of them at any rate, were with the husband.

When the Queen returned she was attired in a neat check travelling dress and she brought the *Fräulein von Helder* in her wake. The latter favoured me with a stiff inclination of her unattractive head.

"Come, Mr. Saunders," said the Queen. "We will start at once, please."

On going to the door we found a pair-horse sleigh awaiting us. A smaller sleigh was attached behind into which a couple of large boxes had been placed. Remembering *Lame Peter's* paraphernalia I collected the various articles of my disguise and stowed them beside the boxes in the luggage sleigh.

"Whatever are those things?" asked the Queen.

I explained briefly how they had come into my temporary possession, and, as the matter seemed to interest her Majesty, gave a detailed account of my journey to Hheldersburg.

"You behaved magnificently," said the Queen with suppressed enthusiasm. "You displayed great resource and great courage. I am touched to think that it was for my sake you made those efforts."

I felt exceedingly uncomfortable.

"I conceived it to be my duty to reach your Majesty somehow," I replied, "and the opposition offered to my mission piqued my pride. I only trust that my success may have good results both in its immediate and ultimate consequences."

"I hope so, but I doubt it," replied the Queen. "That rests with my husband."

The sun had gone down behind the mountains and the fall in the temperature was very noticeable. It was very still and beautiful, and the sky was full of clear cool greens and pinks and yellows. Suddenly I noticed the Queen bowing to right and left, and looking out, I saw soldiers saluting at either side of the roadway. Then I saw Max, and I shall never

forget his look of anger and and astonishment as his gaze fell upon me. Smiling in spite of myself, I raised my cap, and in another moment we had passed through the guardsmen who had barred my first attempt to get to Heldersburg. When we reached the main street of Weisheim the people were crowded in great numbers at the side of the road. Peasants in sheepskins, merchants and professional men in furs, soliders in smart green cloaks, jostled one another at the edge of the white highway.

"The Queen, the Queen!" they cried. Hats were lifted and the sound of cheering began. The further we advanced the denser grew the throng, the louder swelled the noise of their acclaim. It was like a triumphal procession, and though I felt the exhilarating power of the situation I was somewhat at a loss to comprehend its meaning. As for the Queen, she was transfigured into a beautiful gracious woman; she bowed incessantly, her eyes sparkled, her red lips parted in a beatific smile. Of her popularity there was little doubt; of her love of popularity none at all. As we passed through the town the crowd gradually thinned, and the last stage of our journey was performed in silence. As we neared the Brunvarad the Queen's face grew set and hard again.

On reaching the Palace, we three entered the Hall together. The King was there dressed in high leggings, and wearing a brown Norfolk jacket over a woollen sweater. He was talking to a man I had never seen before. A clean-shaven, broad-browed man, with dark piercing eyes and a restless manner. They rose as we approached, the stranger bowing.

"I trust you have enjoyed your excursion to Heldersburg," said the King formally.

"I am rather tired, thank you," replied the Queen. "I shall go and rest before dinner."

"Quite right," said the King. "Remember there is Mrs. Van Troeber's dance at the Pariserhof to-night."

"I shall not go there," said the Queen curtly, and she and the Fräulein mounted the stairs.

"How did you do it?" asked the King the moment the ladies were out of earshot. I glanced involuntarily at the stranger, hesitating to speak freely before him.

"Oh, permit me," said the King, "to introduce to you Herr Schneider, the celebrated Vienna detective. He enjoys my fullest confidence."

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Saunders," said Herr Schneider shaking me warmly by the hand. "His Majesty has invited me here for purposes of investigation. It seems there is a certain amount of discontent here in Weissheim and in other parts of Grimland. It is my part to sound the depths of that discontent, to sort out the sheep from the goats, and to differentiate the black goats from the merely piebald." He spoke very glibly and I felt an instinctive dislike for the man growing up within me. He was of medium height and rather stout, and his face was unmistakably a clever one. What I disliked about him was his restless manner. His large dark eyes were never in repose—they were always searching, questioning, weighing. His hands too—broad, fat hands—were never for a moment still. He gesti-

culated freely when he spoke, and when he listened fingered his face incessantly. He looked like a man who had seen much, and that mostly evil.

I narrated the circumstances of my journey to Heldersburg, and knowing that the King had a keen eye for the humorous, dwelt as much as possible on the comic side of the affair, the quaint disguise I had been led to adopt, and the blank look of dismay on young Max's face when he saw me driving back in the Queen's sleigh. To my surprise the King did not even smile.

"It was a fine piece of work, Saunders," he said simply.

"Splendid, splendid," murmured the detective stroking his blue chin.

"Look here, Saunders," pursued the King, "I am immensely pleased with the result of your efforts. The Queen's return is a great relief to me. Rumours had been spread of a serious quarrel between us, and I am told an impromptu out-of-doors meeting was held in the town this afternoon to express sympathy with her Majesty. To those rumours her return has given the lie. My wife understands the art of popularity and as her husband I come in for some faint reflection of the popular favour. You perceive the high motives which made me dread even a temporary separation from the wife of my bosom."

"They cheered us as we passed through Weisheim," I said.

"They cheered the Queen," corrected King Karl. "They should have cheered you. You were the

hero, the man who risked his life to do a service to his friend."

"You are gracious, sire. In truth I don't think I ran a very great risk."

"I beg to disagree with you," said the King, laying a kindly hand on my shoulder. "Had the amiable Fritz suspected who it was inside Lame Peter's shaggy coat, you would not be sitting here amusing us with the recital of your experiences. By the way, were they really firing at dummies across the ravine?"

"I did not hear any sound of firing."

"I should suggest," said Schneider, "that your Majesty transfers his first regiment of Guards to some other salubrious neighbourhood."

"I used to be proud of my Guards once," said the King bitterly. "I was young and full of illusion, and I thought them a fine body of men. Now I know what they are—a fine pack of wolves. Still, I am fond of animals, and it would be painful to me to part with them."

"Your Majesty will surely not hesitate on this point?" pressed the detective.

"There are good men in the Guards," said the King pensively, "there is young Drechsler and Major von Stromling, loyal men and true."

"Your Majesty mentions two names," sneered Schneider.

"I mention the first two that occur to me," retorted the King sharply. "No, if I cannot win the loyalty of the Guards it will be because I do not deserve it. The men were merely obeying their officers in

stopping my messenger this afternoon. They were not to blame. The man who was responsible was my cousin Fritz."

"Is it not possible to get rid of him?" I asked.

"You do not use the expression 'get rid of' in an Eastern sense I hope," said the King.

"No," I answered laughing; "I merely meant that his sphere of usefulness might be transferred elsewhere."

King Karl shook his head with the air of one who had considered the matter and formed his opinion.

"No," he said. "The broad-shouldered little gentleman is a firebrand. If he is going to commit an act of incendiarism I prefer to be within reach of the flames."

"Your Majesty," broke in Schneider impatiently, "absolutely refuses to do anything. I must say that I call it a dangerous policy of *laissez-faire*."

"And I," retorted the King, "call it a wise policy of masterly inactivity. Come, we will not quarrel over a phrase. I hope both of you gentlemen are going to Mrs. Van Troeber's dance to-night."

"I shall be very pleased to go," replied the detective, "in the course of my professional duty."

"And I in the course of my search for pleasure, if I am invited," I said.

"You are invited right enough," said the King. "We do not attend the ordinary hotel weekly dances, but a party from the Brun-varad frequently graces private balls given by privileged individuals such as Mrs. Van Troeber. Thus you see, my dear

Saunders, snobbishness, like the 'pinus Alpestris,' flourishes at exceedingly great altitudes."

So saying the King rose, leaving me and Herr Schneider alone together.

"An extraordinary person," said my companion with a gesture in the direction of the departed monarch.

"In a sense, yes," I replied. "But of how few people could one say anything different."

"True," returned the detective glibly. "Your reflection is commonplace, but proves that you have a discerning eye for character. We are all extraordinary in some particular, and doubtless in your eyes I myself seem far from ordinary."

"I should say your ability was far from ordinary," I replied, not from politeness but because it seemed the natural thing to say.

"You are perfectly right," he said easily. "And I was perfectly right in saying that you have a discerning eye. We have evidently this much in common, that we are frank in our speech and impervious to compliments."

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me in the latter respect," I said. "I love compliments."

"You are younger than I. When you are my age you will have seen deeper into things, you will know that a compliment—even a sincere one—merely means that a small portion of somebody's brain is momentarily occupied in favourably considering something you have said or done."

"But I like to give occupation to even a small portion of other people's brains," I objected.

“It may be useful in practice,” admitted Schneider, “for one’s career for instance; but as a sentiment it is absurd. Fame, which is the amalgamated compliment of the multitude, is a surprisingly empty thing when you come to look into it. Put yourself into the position of an admirer. Who are your heroes—Napoleon, Washington, Bismarck? In what respect are you the better for their having lived, or they the better for your admiration. It is the pleasures and pains of life that really count, not the sentiment. A bilious headache or an aching tooth is a greater calamity than a lost battle of a century ago. A good dinner or an increase in one’s income affords one greater happiness than a favourable notice in a time-serving newspaper.

“I feel like that sometimes,” I said, “when I do I knock off pastry and bitter beer.”

Schneider laughed.

“Ha!” he cried, “you, too, are a materialist, though not quite such a good one as myself. Happiness, which is the one thing desirable, is a condition of the brain. The brain is part of the nervous system. Through the nerves one receives sensations, pleasant or the reverse. If one takes care that these sensations are uniformly pleasant, one achieves that condition of mind which spells happiness.”

“And you are happy?” I enquired.

Schneider’s restless eyes concentrated themselves on me with a fierce stare, and he made a gesture of impatience.

“Happy!” he cried with bitter inconsistency;

"There is no such thing as happiness. One cannot be happy without self-consciousness. Unless one analyses the condition of one's mind one merely leads the life of an animal, eating and drinking and pleasuring, in a vague unreasoning way, which is no more happiness than were the long-forgotten days of our undeveloped babyhood. And yet if we are constantly analysing our condition, if we are constantly asking ourselves, is this pleasure? is my mind in a state of pleasurable activity or comfortable repose? assuredly there is no joy there. Therefore I say there is no such thing as happiness."

"It seems to me," I replied, "that it is desirable to hit the mean between unconscious animation and morbid introspection."

"Perfection is always desirable," he retorted. "It is likewise invariably unattainable. A cup of hot coffee is pleasant, and so is a glass of iced champagne. The happy mean which you advocate would be a lukewarm drink — which is an abomination."

"Pardon," I replied. "You are confusing the mean between two excellences, which is bad, with the mean between two evils, which is good."

Schneider rose and walked rapidly about the room apparently seeking for an answer.

"Mr. Saunders," he said abruptly.

"Yes."

"You will, of course, mention my profession to no one. I am supposed to be one of his Majesty's ordinary guests."

"I quite understand."

"It is necessary for my success that my true vocation should remain unsuspected."

"Naturally."

"Unfortunately King Karl is so phenomenally indiscreet."

"His indiscretion," I interrupted, "is mostly on the surface."

My remark seemed to surprise the detective considerably.

"I wonder if you are right," he muttered at length. "You seem to have a fair share of perspicacity. Only, if you are right, my estimate of the King's character is absolutely wrong."

"Most people," I said gently, "find it saves time and trouble to accept my statements without the trouble of verification."

CHAPTER IX

THE King, Miss Anchester, Herr Schneider and myself furnished the Brun-varad contingent for Mrs. Van Troeber's ball at the Pariserhof that evening.

The Queen, who had refrained from putting in an appearance at dinner, pleaded fatigue and a slight headache as an excuse for her absence.

The King, whose digestion was as boyish as his spirits, insisted on an early start, and so informal were his tastes that he obtained our sanction to traverse the half-mile which separated the scene of the festivities from the Royal dwelling, on foot. Accordingly we slipped on snow-boots over our pumps, donned warm cloaks and overcoats, and sallied forth into the starlit, silent night. It was extremely cold, but the air was dry and very still, and as the snow crunched and squeaked beneath our feet, I felt my spirits rising in a way they had never risen when journeying to a dance in London. Soon we were amongst the lighted streets of Weissheim, and an occasional passenger would recognise the King's burly form, and doff his hat with a low-growled "Vivat! Majestat."

We entered the Pariserhof by a side door, and were conducted to the ball-room, where Mrs. Van

Troeber, a handsome American lady with a Parisian gown and a blazing wealth of diamonds, received us with the restrained cordiality due to the denizens of a Royal Palace.

The ball-room was a large and very handsome apartment, and its normally rich decoration was augmented by a lavish display of flowers and greenery.

I never was a dancing man. To be quite frank I always regard this particular form of entertainment as a deplorable waste both of means and energy. All the same I was constrained to admit that the Pariserhof ball-room presented a spectacle which was well worth tramping half a mile of frozen snow to see.

The guests were mainly English and Americans, and a singularly healthy and pleasant-looking crowd. The women were as well-dressed as at any function I have ever attended in London, and the jewellery displayed would have sufficed to materially reduce the National Debt of Grimland. Add to this an excellent band, a brilliant but soft scheme of lighting, an exceptionally high standard of dancing, and you will pardon the mildly voluptuous thrill with which I regarded the refined animation of the scene. I noticed the Grand Duke Fritz leaning his broad back against a gilded pilaster, his eyes following the dancers as if seeking for some one he could not find. I saw Max attired in faultless evening dress with an immaculate white waistcoat, conducting a splendid young woman with the shoulders of a goddess and an epoch-making ball dress to a thickly-

flowered alcove, and—profanity of profanities—yawning with the shameless ennui of his gilded blasé youth. I caught a glimpse of his sister, as she waltzed past me with the light earth-scorning energy of the perfect dancer, fresh, frankly rapturous, the epitome of fearless, loveable girlhood; a figure to restore one's shaken faith in human happiness, and turn to folly the unhealthy moralisings of Herr Schneider's morbid brain. I turned to Miss Anchester who stood beside me, a tall, stately figure in white, a grey-eyed self-possessed spectator, with a look of quiet enjoyment on her clear-cut features.

"Are you engaged this dance?" I asked.

"My programme speaks for itself," she replied, handing me an unmarked card.

"May I have the pleasure?"

"Certainly."

We had hardly started dancing when the music came to a stop.

"How typical of life," I remarked.

My partner knitted her brows as if in annoyance. "I do not follow your train of thought," she said, after a moment's pause.

"Naturally," I retorted, "my thoughts have no train."

"In other words, you speak without thinking."

"Almost invariably. One thereby avoids grammatical accuracy and all suspicion of intellectuality."

"The latter, of course, must be very difficult."

"That reminds me," I said.

"What reminds you of what?"

"Your caustic remark reminds me of a letter."

"You are pleased to be cryptic."

"If you will condescend to accompany me to a secluded spot, I shall be pleased to be explanatory."

We walked in silence to an unoccupied settee in a palm-decorated recess.

"When we had that little tumble this morning," I began, as we seated ourselves, "a letter fell out of your pocket."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Anchester. "I could not imagine where it had got to."

"Have you read it?" I inquired.

"Yes."

"So have I."

At my admission her cheeks flamed red, her eyes glowered unspeakable contempt, her lips trembled to pronounce—I could swear—the word "cad."

"Was that in accordance with your usual habits or merely a solitary instance of ungentlemanliness?" she asked icily.

"Will you condescend to hear my explanation?" I countered, smiling in spite of myself at her bitter, but perfectly natural resentment.

"I will hear what you have to say on the subject," she said, stiffly.

"When that letter fell from your pocket this morning, you were in a state of unconsciousness. For safety I put the letter into my own pocket, meaning to restore it to you at the first opportunity. Naturally, being a man, I forgot all about it. After lunch a letter from my mother arrived for me. I was interrupted in its perusal, and put it back—half-

read into my pocket. Later on I took out your letter under the impression that it was my own. The handwriting was the same, and I had read a good portion of it before discovering that it was not intended for my eyes. I don't know whether that sounds very plausible," I went on looking straight into her grey eyes," but whether it does or does not, it is the truth, and as such I must ask you to believe it."

The high colour had gradually subsided from her cheek, and the look of wrath melted into one of disdain.

"Of course I believe you—implicitly," she said. "Still it was not very—very intellectual, was it?"

"I suppose it seems very foolish," I said; "but it was the handwriting that caused the error—that and my own absent-mindedness. Still, I don't see that any harm has been done. My reading the letter has at any rate cleared up much that was difficult to understand."

"I don't follow you."

"I appear to be very unintelligible to-day. I mean that your conduct towards me has been explained."

"My conduct towards you!"

"Yes; you cannot deny that acting on my mother's extraordinary suggestion you have adopted towards me a tone of brusque comment and critical acerbity which was hardly the normal behaviour of a young lady towards a man she had never met before, and who was some years her senior."

"Indeed!"

"Take the case of that incident on the Kastel run this morning. I was fortunate enough to render you a service—trivial enough, no doubt—but one which would have merited some slight expression of gratitude had you not so far fallen in with my mother's ridiculous request as to take up an unnatural, and, I have no doubt, unpalatable rôle."

"I humbly crave your forgiveness," she said, mockingly. "At great personal risk you save me the certainty of a terrible accident. Had you not stood your ground like a hero, and exerted on my behalf the skill and energy of a finished athlete, I should have dashed over David to the certainty of a maiming, perhaps fatal fall. And yet so callous is my heart, so devoid of the ordinary instincts of gratitude, that I maintain unmoved my slighting, snubbing rôle, and reward my noble preserver with no more thanks than a grudging admission that another might conceivably not have acted as he had done."

The tone in which these remarks were delivered only just saved them from being a deadly insult. And yet, making allowance for rhetorical exaggeration, they were little more than the actual truth, and the manner in which she had turned to scorn my modest plaint for an unthanked service, was almost brutal in its effective disdain. I know it made me very angry.

"Very well," I said rising, "we will leave the matter there. It appears you rather misunderstood me—the fault no doubt was mine."

The music had started again, and I offered my arm to my companion with the intention of re-seeking the ball-room.

"One moment," she said. "I have heard your explanation—hear mine. I met your mother some years ago in London—to be precise, in Bermondsey, where we worked together in a common Charity. Since then I have visited your mother's house and dined with her more than once, but on each occasion you were away from home. When you decided to come out here, your mother, knowing that I was filling an engagement as Governess to the Royal children, and foreseeing that we should be to a certain extent, thrown together, wrote to me giving her view of your character, and asking me to try and reduce what she considered your somewhat inflated opinion of your own abilities. I have a great respect for your mother, and I did, and shall do, my best to carry out her instructions."

At the conclusion of her explanation, Miss Anchester indulged in a merry and perfectly natural laugh. I concluded she was climbing down.

"My mother is a very good woman," I said, "and not in most respects an unwise one. Nevertheless she has, to use a vulgarism, a bee in her bonnet, a large, fussy, disquieting bee. She is under the delusion that I am a mass of conceit, and to eradicate this hypothetical defect in my character she is prepared to go any length, even to the extent of imposing this extremely distasteful mission on you."

"Who said it was distasteful?" queried Miss Anchester with another laugh.

"I cannot imagine it to be otherwise," I said. "And now we have had this little explanation I trust you will take an unbiassed and more favourable view of my character."

"Your value my opinion?"

"I value everybody's opinion. I do not care to appear before the world in the guise of a puffed-up braggart."

"You are not conscious of being in any way conceited?" she inquired, still smiling.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"We are none of us perfect," I replied. "A good opinion of one's self is a prevalent fault, and not a bad one either. It is surely better than going through life with a trembling distrust of one's own capacities."

"Delightfully put," said the Governess, looking me merrily in the face. "Why, I can read you like book."

"You are the second person who has made that remark to me to-day," I replied. "I must be very legible."

"Who else said so?" asked Miss Anchester with visible surprise.

"The Queen," I answered.

"The Queen!"

"Yes," I said. "I went to Heldersburg this afternoon with a message to her from his Majesty."

"Oh, you were the King's messenger!" she ejaculated. "King Karl told me the whole story without mentioning names. I congratulate you on your success."

"Now you are ministering to my conceit," I remarked, laughing in turn.

"Come," she said looking away, "we must return to the dancing."

"May I take up the broken thread of Terpsichore?"

"You may dance with me again if that is what you mean, but you must not talk like that."

At the conclusion of the dance the King approached us. He had been dancing with Mrs. Van Troeber, and was very warm and short of breath.

"This rarified air," he said, "is frightfully unsatisfying to a short-winded person like myself. Miss Anchester, may I have the pleasure of a dance?"

I felt some one gently touching my arm, and looked round. It was General Meyer.

"You are an Englishman," he said; "you will not refuse to have a drink with me."

"If you make it a question of upholding my national prestige, I cannot," I replied.

"I want you to tell me all about your experience this afternoon," he said, as we sauntered off towards the refreshment room.

I recounted my adventures, and he listened with palpable, albeit silent, amusement.

"That threat about the Zaubertisch was a stroke of genius," he said. "The joke is, that the Queen, for the first time in her life, is thoroughly afraid of her husband."

"It is to be hoped that the condition will be permanent," I commented.

The commander-in-chief made an expressive gesture.

"It is not likely," he said. "King Karl is an excellent man—he is a brave man. Towards men, in spite of his easy manner, he can be stern—ruthless. Towards his wife he is weakness itself. The phenomenon is not an uncommon one."

"Ah!" I said; "if he would but bully her, frighten her, ill-treat her even, it would be the best possible thing for his own peace, and that of the country."

"True, perfectly true," assented my companion. "Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, we cannot expect the desired domestic revolution to be permanent. By the way, do you want a drink?"

"I would far rather not," I replied.

"So would I. The habit of drinking between meals has no attraction for me, but it is sometimes necessary to conform to popular prejudices. What do you think of Schneider?"

"I think him clever," I answered.

"He has a brilliant record. Do you think he is trustworthy?"

"I should say so. I frankly admit I do not feel disposed to like him, but he does not seem the sort of man to play a double game. I fancy his heart is in his work."

"I am inclined to agree with you," said my companion after a pause; "but the King unfortunately has taken a strong dislike to him."

"And you?" I asked.

"Oh, I, I like him well enough. The fellow

has a fund of interesting reminiscences and is no fool. The average Grimlander is."

"You are a Grimlander yourself," I said.

"I am a Jew," he retorted. "A Jew of Grimland if you will, but first and foremost a Jew."

"It is to your credit to be proud of it," I said.

"I am not proud of it all," he retorted. "I admit the obvious, that is all. I would sooner be an adventurous swashbuckler like the Grand Duke, or even a reckless young detrimental like Max, than what I am—a cautious, scheming, uncourageous Jew."

"Nonsense," I said good-humouredly. "A man who has won his way to the position of commander-in-chief, must not call himself uncourageous."

"I have never been in action in my life," he said ; "and I pray to heaven that I never may be. I do not fear death more than other people, but I am incapable of the fighting lust which alone carries men through the terrors of the battle-field. I won my way to my present position not by nerve, but by brains. I invented a gun-carriage which was capable of being transported rapidly over snow, and the King, who has a good eye for ability, singled me out early in my career, and ever since has lost no opportunity of advancing me. Therefore I serve him with a whole heart, and my intelligence, such as it is, is at his service. More than that I cannot offer him, for I have not the instincts of a soldier."

How much truth there was in my companion's frank self-depreciation it was impossible to say. His manner, as always, was sarcastic and insincere,

and a half-smile flitted perpetually around his mobile lips. But a physically brave man does not call himself a coward, and I felt that the General's admission was probably true enough up to a point.

"Let us go back," he said. "Our absence will be noticed. Tell me, have you ever seen a finer widow than Mrs. Van Troeber?"

"A widow?"

"Yes; for the moment. Is she not magnificent?"

I hastened to give my assent. General Meyer's eyes were half shut in a contemplative rhapsody and the effect was distinctly ridiculous. He had evidently been a very handsome man in his youth, and would certainly be a very ugly one in his old age. At the present moment he was on the border line, a man such as middle-aged women admire and young ones laugh at, his own opinion undoubtedly coinciding with that of the former.

We strolled back to the ball-room where a big square-dance was in progress.

"The cotillon," whispered my companion. "Is not Mrs. Van Troeber divine?"

"A graceful dancer," I admitted; "and the dance itself is very pretty."

Suddenly the figure came to an end, and the dancers broke up into small isolated groups. Then, before I was aware of what was happening, a young lady rushed towards me, and thrust something into my hand.

"I beg to offer you a present," said the Prinzessin Mathilde, for it was she.

Considerably mystified, I looked at the object

she had forced upon me. It was a knife in an embossed leather sheath, its handle prettily enamelled in different colours after the fashion of the country's handiwork.

"I am much obliged," I said, quite at a loss to account for the unexpected generosity.

"Now you must dance the next figure with me," she said. "It is hard on you, I know, but you must conform to the laws of the cotillon."

"I begin to comprehend," I said; "the ladies have presents given to them which they bestow on the man they want to dance with."

"Exactly. Most of the girls are afraid to offer their presents to young men—see, there is Miss Anchester giving a meerschaum pipe to Mr. Schneider—but personally I don't like dancing with old fogies."

"I feel intensely flattered at not being included among the old fogies," I said.

The Princess laughed gaily.

She was a beautiful little dancer, and apart from the compliment of the thing I was glad she had chosen me as a partner. At the end of the cotillon she made a frank demand for refreshment, and I led her to the region of lemonade and strawberry-ices.

"You know I am terribly offended with you," she said, as I handed her some frozen abomination.

"I guessed so much from your manner," I replied sarcastically.

"I refer of course," she went on, "to your unmannerly refusal to bob-sleigh this afternoon."

I wondered whether after all her request might not have been made without the *arrière pensée* of decoying me from the path of duty.

"I fancy your brother would not have been able to help us," I said drily. "I came across him further along the road. He was on duty."

"I know," she said laughing; "he was trying to stop you getting to Heldersburg. So was I. How you outwitted him we can't guess. Both Max and father are in a fearful temper to-night."

"And you are the only amiable member of the family?"

"I and my little brother Stephan, who is in bed and asleep by now."

"I have not the honour of his acquaintance."

"I must introduce you. He is a splendid little fellow, just eight years old, and a great friend of the King's children."

"It seems a pity," I said, "that the friendship does not extend to the elder members of the respective families."

The Princess's expression became serious.

"Oh, I like the Queen well enough," she said.

"But you do not like the King—well enough?"

"Yes I do," she said, after a moment's thought.

"Considering all things, I like him far too much."

"Your remark calls for an explanation."

"I mean," she said, "that he is genial, amusing, fond of his children, and very kind in his manners."

"Is that a reason for tempering your affection?" I inquired.

"You do not understand. The King is a bad

man, and like many bad men has certain very attractive qualities. It is very hard to help liking him."

"Personally," I said, "I do not try. But then I am unaware of his particular wickedness."

"He is very irreligious, to begin with," said the Princess, "and has quarrelled bitterly with the Archbishop of Weidenbruck: Then he treats the poor Queen abominably—his behaviour towards her is notorious. Again he neglects his duties as King most disgracefully. He takes little or no interest in the army, and it is said, though I can hardly believe it, that he is in the pay of Austria."

"Who told you all this?" I said.

"My father," she answered simply.

"Then it is no use my trying to combat your belief."

"My father is a truthful man."

"Whereas I am—doubtful?"

"No, I don't mean that," she laughed, "but you don't know the King. How can you when you have seen practically nothing of him? I don't blame you for taking his part. You are here as his friend, his guest. I respected you immensely for refusing my invitation to bob-sleigh this afternoon, and still more for evading the Guards and getting your message through to Heldersburg. How ever did you do it?"

"If I tell you it must be in confidence."

"Naturally."

I briefly related my method of passing through the guarded Waldpromenade, adding—

"I don't much mind if you do tell your people how I managed it, provided Lame Peter not does get into trouble. You see, the poor old fellow didn't realise he was playing an important part in a dynastic intrigue."

The Princess laughed very heartily at my recital.

"How delicious," she commented, "Do let me tell Max. But won't you come bob-sleighing to-morrow afternoon with us. Come up to the Marienkastel at three o'clock and I will introduce you to Stephan who is devoted to the sport."

"I will come with pleasure," I replied; "if you promise that it is not part of a scheme to lure the King's messenger to destruction."

"I give you my word of honour," she laughed. "But mind you, I don't guarantee a similar guilelessness to all my invitations. We are at war, you and I, and unless I specially stipulate a truce you must take it that hostilities are on the tapis. Now finish your lemonade and take me back to the ball-room."

"You quite make me suspect the lemonade," I said, gulping down my refreshment, and offering her my arm.

CHAPTER X

NEXT morning I awoke at nine o'clock with the pleasant consciousness of having enjoyed a deep and dreamless slumber. Leisurely I rose and made my toilet, meditating the while over the crowded incidents of the past twenty-four hours. Was life at the Brun-varad always like this, I asked myself, a confusing round of gaiety and intrigue, of sport and danger, a disquieting medley of feminine ungraciousness and feminine amenity. Did these things constitute a normal state of affairs at the Winter Palace, or had I by chance happened on a peculiarly eventful day in this delightful and salubrious locality. I came to the conclusion that though Weissheim was a more exciting neighbourhood than South Kensington, I had nevertheless arrived at a juncture, which, if not particularly remarkable for this unstable kingdom, was at any rate raised slightly above the ordinary importance of the country's daily round.

Curiously enough the person who commanded the largest share of my thoughts was neither Miss Anchester nor the Princess, the King nor the Queen, the uncourageous commander-in-chief nor the truculent Grand Duke, but the broad-faced, piercing-eyed detective. The personality of Herr Schneider fasci-

nated me, though why, it was hard to say. I neither admired his personal appearance nor felt the slightest respect for his moral qualities. He was rather ugly, than otherwise, and I felt perfectly certain that his character was the reverse of noble. His restless manner irritated me, and the mere fact that he possessed undoubted ability in his profession was quite insufficient to account for the way in which his individuality had taken hold of my imagination. I fancy the real reason lay in a certain resemblance which his trains of thought seemed to bear to my own. It appeared to me that in his mental outlook, gloomy, pessimistic, analytic as it was, he was but an exaggerated likeness of myself. But he was a man of forty, whereas I was but eight and twenty: what if in another dozen years I should develop into a morbid, disillusioned being such as he was, without the record of a distinguished career behind me, such as he had? I shuddered, for the possibility was unattractive in the extreme.

Having completed my toilet I stepped into my sitting-room with the express determination of evicting my gloomy meditations with the assistance of hot coffee and rolls. As a matter of fact the desired eviction was effected by a somewhat more refined agency. On my plate, and tied together with a bright blue ribbon were some carnations. An inspection of the ribbon disclosed some writing in ink capitals which had spread so much as to be almost indistinguishable. A careful scrutiny at length revealed the word *Gedächtniss*—Remembrance. I smiled involuntarily—my second day

at Weissheim was opening well. My immediate desire was to find out the author of this delicate little attention, and the process of discovery seemed to offer little difficulty, for my acquaintances at Weissheim were not numerous and it was obvious that the male portion might be at once set aside. Next, continuing my process of elimination, I struck out the Fräulein von Helder. She, I argued, would never dream of sending any one flowers. Had she fallen in love with me, she would, as likely as not, have presented me with a dough cake. There remained—but a sudden illuminating thought caused me to alter my method. Miss Anchester had been wearing some carnations in her bosom the previous evening, and though, man-like, I had failed to be impressed by that charming addition to her simple but effective attire, the remembrance of them came back to me as I gazed at the pretty blooms which adorned my solitary breakfast table. Of course it was the Governess who had sent them. Who else could have had any object in doing so? Miss Anchester and I had had a slight misunderstanding and this was her gracious method of admitting that she had been in the wrong. “Gedächtniss!” Remembrance, of what? Of that incident of the Kastel run, of course, which I had alluded to somewhat tactlessly on the previous evening, and of which doubtless she retained a pleasant and romantic recollection. Remembrance of the acerbities, the explanations, the reconciliations, of the past day. She could read me like a book, could she? Certainly I could read her like one. Womanly

despite her pronounced athleticism, sentimental despite her calm, unemotional, critical exterior. I liked the type, and determined, now that the foolish misconception due to my mother's quaint request had been brushed aside, that we should henceforth be the best of friends with each other.

Downstairs I met the King and Herr Schneider chatting quietly over an early pipe.

"I propose taking you on to the curling rink this morning, Saunders," said the former who was evidently in excellent spirits "A strong fellow like you, with a good eye, ought to make a fine curler."

"Does curling need strength?" I enquired. I had seen the game played at Wimbledon, a sort of glorified bowls on the ice, in which "stones" of polished granite were propelled towards a wooden "jack" standing in the centre of a series of concentric rings.

"Sometimes it requires strength," replied the King. "When there is a little snow falling or when the ice is sticky from the force of the sun, it takes a considerable amount of strength to knock an opponent's 'stone' out of the 'house' Every one begins by despising the game, and ends in succumbing to its fascination."

"One comes to scoff, remains to play," I remarked "Are you coming, too, Herr Schneider?"

"No, thank you," replied the detective. "I have seen curling played before. I should certainly start by scoffing, but I do not possess the capacity for enthusiasm necessary for the potential

convert. Miss Anchester has promised to give me a lesson in tobogganing, and I am looking forward to a most enjoyable morning with her."

The curling rink on to which the King conducted me was a flooded piece of level ground, which in summer did duty as a lawn-tennis court. A number of visitors from the Pariserhof, English, Scotch and American, were standing in groups on the ice waiting for the church clock to strike eleven, at which hour lots were drawn to decide which pitch the various players should curl upon. All wore snow-boots on their feet, and most of them carried brooms in their hands. As the clock struck there were general movements towards the Secretary, Colonel Stuart, who held in his hand a small bag containing counters for the prospective players to pick from.

"Numbers on the first pitch, blanks on the middle, reds on the third," called out the Colonel in the tones of one addressing a battalion.

I drew a plain white counter, which put me into the same game as the King, while Colonel Stuart was also one of the eight who were destined by the draw to curl on the central pitch.

The King and the Colonel picked up, and I was selected by the former to play first for his four. This I took as a great compliment till I discovered that the worst player was always chosen to play first, the better performers being reserved for the more difficult situations which occurred later.

"Now then Saunders," said the King, when I had selected a couple of big grey stones out of the

lockers, "tie these pieces of red ribbon on to the handles and get ready to start."

The number one of the other side and myself took up a position at one end of the pitch, the two "Skippers" at the other. The number twos and threes of the respective teams lined up on opposite sides of the track, broom in hand, ready at the word of command to polish the ice in front of the stone if it appeared to have been delivered with too little strength.

"Now then, Number one," sang out the King. "You begin please."

I knelt down on the "crampet," grasped my stone firmly by the handle, swung it back forcibly, and "delivered" it.

The direction was excellent: it went straight for the "tee," knocked it spinning over, and sailed gaily through the "house," as the series of concentric rings are called, finally finishing up abruptly against the banked up snow at the edge of the rink.

"Too much breakfast," was the King's brief but expressive comment.

It was now the turn of my opponent, the other Number one, to send down his stone.

"Keep your eye on my broom," shouted Colonel Stuart to him, "and play with the 'in handle.'"

I watched with attention. The man swung back much as I had done, but he put his "stone" down far more lightly, and as he did so turned his elbow in, imparting a left-to-right spin to his projectile.

"Soop," yelled out the Colonel when the stone had traversed about half the requisite distance.

"Soop, lads, for all ye're worth. Soop, I tell ye, bring the beast along and he'll be a dandy shot yet."

Gradually the stone, which had been aimed somewhat to the left of the tee, curled round, spinning the while on its own axis, till it was fairly in the centre of the pitch. Meanwhile the soopers plied their brooms with demoniac energy till the stone died as far as I could judge about a couple of feet this side of the outermost circle.

"Not enough breakfast," I remarked audibly and perhaps ungenerously. My verdict, however, was not that of the opposing "skip."

"Well played, Barker," roared out the Colonel, "that's a perfect number one shot."

"You want to play your stone just short of the 'house,'" my opponent condescended to explain. "If it is short it may get promotion, if it is too far every rub it gets makes it worse."

I grasped the point with the readiness of one who has attained a fair measure of skill at a great variety of games, and set down my next stone with far less expenditure of force.

"Sweep," yelled the King at once. "Sweep it all the way. Up besoms! it's no good. Man, you're a hog."

This last expression delivered in a tone of infinite sadness and reproach, sounded in my ears a rather unnecessarily violent piece of obloquy.

Mr. Barker once more vouchsafed me a piece of instruction.

"They're shunting your stone out of the track,"

he said, "because it's a 'hog.' There's a line there scratched on the ice some yards in front of the 'house' called the 'hog score.' If you don't get your stone over that it isn't in play."

I was humiliated by my conspicuous ill-success though relieved in my opinion of the King's manners.

After the Number one's had sent down their two stones, the respective Number two's took up their position at the "crampet" end, while the instructive Barker and myself took our places opposite each other among the sweepers.

When the "Skip," bade me sweep I swept with the energy of a strong man desirous of doing his share of the side's work. Inwardly I scoffed at the puerility of the whole thing. The game seemed to me childish or senile according as one considered the trivial nature of its intention or the very moderate amount of strength and energy necessary to achieve success. Nevertheless I was far from being bored. The conditions were so perfect that the uninspiring nature of the game was quite forgotten in them. The bright sun, the keen air, the majestic view were things to oust boredom from the dullest mind, while the extraordinary keenness and enthusiasm of the other players were in themselves a source of constant, albeit somewhat contemptuous, amusement to me. I watched with mild interest the manner in which the Number two's and three's sent down their stones: how the opposing Number two, following Colonel Stuart's stentorian directions, succeeded in establishing his stone in the very centre of the house, "a pot-lid," as they called it.

How the King commanded his side to oust this stone from its proud position by straight forcing shots, and how the Colonel bade his men lay short guards for his "pot-lid" and protect it from these dastardly attempts. When it came to the "Skip-pers" turn to play, they walked down the pitch to the crampet end while the respective Number three's took up their position in the "house," the situation affording the keenest excitement to every one but myself. In spite of our efforts the "pot-lid" still remained in the centre of the 'house,' and the approach to this successful stone was guarded by two other stones about two feet apart which protected it from assault either by the "in-curl" or the "out-curl."

The King's first shot struck away one of the guards but stopped in the place which the dislodged stone had itself been occupying, leaving matters precisely in the "status quo."

Colonel Stuart then tried to block the port between the two guarding stones, but being afraid of doing more harm than good sent down a gentle shot which failed to get over the hog-score and was accordingly swept ignominiously to one side.

Then the King played his second stone, the final shot for our side. By a combination of skill and good luck it curled between the two guards, edged up to the winning shot and quietly shoved it out of the way, stopping dead itself at the moment of contact, in the proud position of "winning stone."

I was prepared for some expression of approval, but I certainly never anticipated the wild ejacula-

tion and ecstatic gestures with which our Number three greeted the King's fortunate essay.

"Man, ye've done it!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "You for a curler! Sehr gut gespielt!" and with this, the Weissheim curler's concentrated essence of all praise, he hurled his besom high into the air, and gave vent to a fearsome and inarticulate yell.

The King beamed all over his sun-burned countenance with obvious pleasure in his success, and patting me on the back chaffed me humorously about my failure to get a stone in play and offered me a little practical advice as to the method of delivery.

The last shot however had yet to be played. It was possible that Colonel Stuart might repeat the King's successful performance of "drawing the port" and substituting his own stone for the winner. As a matter of fact, what he did was to strike one of our short stones, promoting it to second and making us two stones "in," to the huge delight of our side and the pathetic disgust of our opponents.

At the conclusion of this "end" we began again playing the other way of the pitch. My second effort was much more successful than my first. Both my stones were "in play," and one of them was eventually promoted into the proud position of being the winner. Gradually a little of the prevailing enthusiasm began to affect me. I "sooped," no longer with the perfunctory energy of the good-natured scoffer, but with a little of the true curler's zeal. I took considerable pains with

my own shots, and was rewarded with a fair amount of success and my "Skipper's" commendation. On one occasion indeed, when I succeeded in striking a good shot of the opposing Number one's out of the "house," I was awarded a "Sehr gut gespielt." Finally, at the last "end" before lunch, I sent down a couple of stones which the King informed me were "two perfect number one's." My heart swelled within me, and I looked round to note the expression of admiration which I felt sure all faces would be wearing for such a rapidly improved novice. My glance fell on Miss Anchester and Herr Schneider, who were standing behind me watching the game. Their rakes and elbow-pads, as well as their flushed countenances proclaimed that they had been tobogganing. They waited watching till the conclusion of the "end," when the King and I, victors in the encounter, joined them, and together we trudged back in the direction of the Brun-varad. The King, taking the detective by the arm, walked on ahead leaving me with Miss Anchester.

"How do you like curling?" asked my companion.

"It seems to me a game for old men—or ladies," I remarked.

"That is gallant, but hardly an answer to my question."

"The answer is implied. I prefer something a shade more strenuous."

"You find it a trifle too subtle?"

"No," I replied. "I think I mastered the

difficulties pretty quickly. My last two shots left little to be desired."

"Of course," said Miss Anchester calmly. "Any one can play a number one shot. If you practice patiently you may work your way up to be a number two, or even conceivably a number three, should there be a scarcity of good players on the ice. You will be better able then to appreciate the niceties of the game."

"You are encouraging," I replied. "When you suggest the possibility of my one day playing Number three you fairly dazzle my imagination."

"Please don't be sarcastic," said Miss Anchester dispassionately. "Sarcasm is a weapon which requires very delicate handling to be effective. Seriously though, I gave you credit for the necessary ambition and patience to make a strong bid for success on the curling rink"

"Are you aware," I said laughing, "that you are lecturing me? Is it an unwitting continuance of your schoolroom methods, or are you still determined to carry out my mother's policy at all costs?"

"If I seem to lecture," she replied, "it is because you lay yourself open to rebuke. The truthfulness of your mother's opinion of you is borne in on me more and more every time I speak with you."

"I thought we had done with all that nonsense," I said.

"Why?"

"I am wearing a very charming flower in my button-hole."

"So I perceive."

"I took it as a token of reconciliation."

Miss Anchester opened her grey eyes. "What on earth do you mean?" she asked. It was impossible to doubt the genuineness of her mystification.

"You do not deny that you were wearing carnations in your dress last night?" I enquired.

"Why should I? You mean that you are wearing the same kind of flower to-day as a mute appeal to me to mitigate my severity. It is very touching of you."

"Do you mean to say," I asked, considerably nettled, "that the bunch of carnations which I found on my plate at breakfast this morning was not——"

"Sent by me? Really Mr. Saunders you might spare a little of your abundant self-respect for other people."

"But the blue ribbon—Gedächtniss," I blurted out.

Miss Anchester smiled involuntarily.

"Now you are becoming indiscreet—painfully indiscreet," she remarked.

"On your word of honour," I said, "was it really not you who sent them?"

"I have denied it by implications," she retorted coldly, "and that is quite sufficient. I don't know why you should consider me the most foolish woman in Weissheim."

"But who——"

"I do not consider myself qualified to unravel the fascinating mystery. Perhaps it was all a mistake."

“Fräulein von Helder,” I muttered. “The Prinzessin Mathilde, the—Good Heavens! The Queen!”

Miss Anchester laughed audibly, and then turned her head away to hide her mirth.

Personally I saw nothing to laugh at. A chill, a sinking fear of vague but dishonourable possibilities struck at my heart. If matters took the turn I dreaded I should have to leave Weissheim in haste. And that for several reasons I was unwilling to do.

CHAPTER XI

“**H**AVE you any plans for this afternoon, Mr. Saunders?”

It was with these words that the Queen broke the pathetic silence she had hitherto maintained during our midday meal. Her expression was that of a martyr, and the cadence of her voice suggested deep sorrow.

“I have promised to go bob-sleighbing with the Prinzessin Mathilde, your Majesty,” I replied.

“Perhaps,” she went on sadly. “You will permit me to drive you to the Marienkastel. I am paying a visit to the Gross-herzog this afternoon.”

“It would give me very great pleasure,” I replied with unhesitating mendacity. I had purposely removed the carnations from my button-hole before sitting down to lunch, and the last thing I desired was anything in the nature of a tête-à-tête with their donor.

“We will start at three,” said her Majesty rising at the conclusion of the meal. Miss Anchester darted a humorously scornful glance at me, and followed her royal mistress from the room.

“How did you get on at tobogganing, Herr Schneider?” asked the King.

The detective’s bright eyes shone brighter than ever at the question.

"It was magnificent, sire," he replied with a florid gesture. "I told Herr Saunders yesterday that I doubted the existence of human happiness. I was wrong, for I have found it on the toboggan run."

"Did you have many spills?" I enquired.

"Several," he answered, "but a fall into soft snow is one of the most delicious experiences I have ever tasted. It is as pleasurable as the swift rush down the smooth track with the wind whistling in your ears, the white banks flashing past you, and your heart singing with the ecstasy of tremendous speed. I have only tried the Children's run so far, but I long to go on the Kastel run, to race down the straight, to spin round the corners, to take Jonathan and David perilously high with the certainty that an error of judgment would send one spinning through a thousand feet of space to a glorious death on the Nonnensee."

For a second the King's eyes and mine met. Herr Schneider's countenance bespoke extraordinary excitement. His big mobile face was twitching painfully and his eyes gleamed with an exhilaration that was hardly sane.

"And how are your professional enquiries progressing?" asked the King coolly.

Herr Schneider shrugged his shoulders and gesticulated with both hands. "One must have time, sire," he replied. "In a delicate business such as this, it is necessary to become familiar with one's surroundings by degrees. At present I suspect every one but your Majesty; even your good friends

here, General Meyer and Herr Saunders. I must look into people's souls and that cannot be done in a day though my eyes are keen and practised to the work. Your Majesty need not fear my devotion to my task."

"If you propose looking into my soul," said General Meyer slowly, "you will find the process considerably duller than tobogganing. I occasionally direct a glance that way myself, and the view is very dreary."

"To the psychologist all souls are interesting," retorted Schneider; "there is so much evil even in the most virtuous of men."

"There is some soul of evil in things good," I remarked, "'would men observingly distil it out,' as our greatest poet might have said if he had been an international detective. Still, I am glad you liked tobogganning, Herr Schneider; a love of sport is a necessary characteristic in Weissheim."

Herr Schneider rose, "Sport!" he said, snapping his fingers contemptuously. "The word has no meaning for me. Excitement, danger! speed! Those are things to live for, and to die for. But with your Majesty's permission I will withdraw. I have your Majesty's business to attend to."

"I don't remember ever disliking a man so thoroughly in my life," said the King as the detective closed the door behind him. "I infinitely prefer my unprincipled cousin Fritz."

"I find it difficult to dislike a man who takes so little trouble to conceal his unpleasant disposition," said General Meyer. "I fancy your Majesty has in

him an excellent servant, if not a particularly agreeable companion."

At three o'clock I started out for the Marienkastel in the company of her Majesty, the Queen. The coachman, a broad-shouldered man with a big red beard, I took at first sight for the man who had driven me on the previous afternoon. At a second glance my observant eye discerned a difference in the shape and angle of the nose, and I presumed, naturally enough, that he was a relation of my former driver.

"I am keenly looking forward to being taken on a bob-sleigh, your Majesty," I began, by way of starting conversation. As a general rule I addressed the King in English, a language he understood and spoke with perfect ease. The Queen however, who did not share the Anglophil tendencies of her husband, preferred to be addressed in German, and it was in that tongue that I had made my commonplace remark.

"Let us speak English," said her Majesty, suiting the action to the word. "It is more agreeable to feel one is not being listened to by a menial."

My objections on that score were non-existent, but it was necessary to comply with the royal desire.

"Is it always fine like this at Weissheim?" I enquired.

"Good gracious, no," replied my companion, "but the weather looks pretty settled just at present. You see that long wisp of fog hanging over the far end of the Nonnensee. We call

it 'the fish.' When the fish creeps up the valley towards Reifinsdorf it means that the weather is going to change. Our bad weather comes from Austria, and we watch for it through the gap between the Klagberg and the Trau-altar. An Austrian wind means snow, one day's, two days', a week's snow. Silent, dark, depressing—Ugh ! I hate Weissheim."

"But you do not hate it now that the sky is clear ?" I asked.

"The sky clear !" she repeated sadly. "Yes, but how can clear skies cheer a woman whose husband is a tyrant—a weak, vacillating, irreligious tyrant. Were his tyranny the oppression of a strong man it might be tolerable ; but to be bullied and threatened by a man one despises, could anything be more humiliating to a woman of spirit ?"

"Has the King bullied you since your return ?" I asked, mindful of my unauthorised promise that bygones should be bygones.

"I questioned him as to his threat about the Zaubertisch," replied the Queen, "and he did not deny having uttered it. The man is a monster—and a weak monster."

"Is it not a case of the iron hand in the velvet glove ?"

"No," she replied curtly, "it is a case of a palsied hand in a glove of mail. Some one has been stiffening his feeble spirit. I suspect that man Schneider. Who is he ? The King says he is an Austrian physician. Personally I believe he is a detective. What do you think, Mr. Saunders ?"

"My knowledge of Herr Schneider is of the slightest," I answered evasively. "He seems very enthusiastic on the subject of tobogganning."

"Ugh!" said the Queen, "I hate him. He has the eyes of a serpent—they fascinate one by their utter absence of pity. But tell me," she went on laying her gloved hand lightly on my arm, "what on earth is a woman in my position to do. Grimland is the country of my adoption, and as a conscientious woman I put its welfare before everything. I see the State tottering for want of firm government, the Church neglected, the Army slighted and openly resentful. The Nation cries out for a strong, God-fearing man, and in the Marienkastel such a one is to be found. Because I have taken counsel with the Grand Duke, I have been called disloyal. Disloyal, forsooth, I who risk position, fame, everything in my loyalty to the people of Grimland! I know the Grand Duke well: how loth he is to raise a hand against his cousin, how reluctant to take a step which may lead to bloodshed and temporary disorder. But he is a man whose watchword is Duty, and he will not shrink from a distasteful task if the hour calls him!"

And this woman had said she could read me like a book! Assuredly if ever a human being had laid bare her heart and mind the Queen had done so before me. She loved the Grand Duke Fritz—unconsciously no doubt—and she accepted the lofty estimate of his character which he himself had offered her. The man was ambitious, unprincipled, and a hypocrite, quite unworthy to be mentioned in the

same breath as her lawful husband. Obviously it was no good my saying so. When a wife of many years' standing is thoroughly dissatisfied with her spouse it is of little use for a comparative stranger to say that she ought to know him better. The right course was to disillusion her on the subject of the Grand Duke, but though I was quite sure my estimate of his character was the correct one, I had remarkably little with which to back my opinion. His bluff, uncultured manner she took for straightforwardness, his calculated friendliness to the Church and his lofty religious utterances appealed to her narrow unintelligent spirituality. To destroy her idol was a difficult and at the best a thankless task. To strive to usurp his place was to juggle with honour, and to supplant one unsatisfactory situation with another. And yet my instinct bade me resume the tone of vague sentimentality I had adopted the previous afternoon at Heldersburg.

"I found some carnations on my plate at breakfast this morning," I said.

"I know," said the Queen simply, "I sent them."

"I prized them much," I went on, "but I prize the ribbon which bound them more, because it spoke of remembrance."

"It was remembrance of your noble conduct in forcing your way to Heldersburg," she said.

"That," I retorted, "is your remembrance. Mine is of a noble woman, misunderstood, slighted, contemned, but faithful in the face of great provocation. True to her country, and her honour, true to herself."

I was rewarded for this hypocritical utterance by a tender pressure of the arm.

"It is good to be understood," she sighed.

"You have deigned to ask my advice," I continued. "Such as it is I offer it. There is discontent in the country. The Church is offended, the Army restless, the people expectant. There is a fever on the land. Around are Russia, Germany, Austria, alert, greedy, prepared. The body politic is sick and the Eagles are gathered together. To bring the fever to a head is simple; to keep off the birds of prey from the enfeebled frame is by no means so easy. Our duty, your duty especially, is to exercise a soothing influence, to allay irritation, to seek peace at the sacrifice of all personal considerations, to ensure it at the price of everything but self-respect. I know your difficulties, I know your proud sensitive heart, and I know too, the high honour that is your guiding star. That you will put up with domestic misery, that you will sacrifice your private happiness to the general weal, is my belief, because it is also my belief that I know your royal nature."

To my surprise and not a little to my dismay, my companion burst into tears.

"Oh, Mr. Saunders!" she cried, "I used always to dislike Englishmen. It seemed to me that they had no temperament, that they were mere animals, delighting in sport and the gross pleasure of the table. Either I have been much mistaken or else you are a great exception to the generality."

"It is the fate of my countrymen to be mis-

understood, the world over," I replied sentimentously.

The Queen applied her handkerchief to her streaming eyes with the effective daintiness of the practised weeper.

"Please stop the coachman," she said, still sobbing. "I cannot visit the Schattensbergs with red eyes."

"Is it necessary to visit them at all?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this," I answered. "Because your popularity throughout the country is great—deservedly great—your attitude is watched, your movements noted. The ambitions of the Grand Duke——"

"Ambitions?"

"Legitimate aspirations," I substituted hastily, "are well known. If it is generally believed that you so far despair of King Karl's capacities as a ruler, as to favour these 'legitimate aspirations,' it will do much to precipitate that fever which we have agreed would be so dangerous an affliction for Grimland at the present juncture."

"Then you advise me to see less of the Schattensbergs in the future?" she asked.

Her confidence was almost touching in its readiness.

"In the immediate future," I replied. "Remember, we are giving the King a chance. If any one can bring home to him the seriousness of his position, the sacred nature of his charge, it is you. Your task is a difficult as well as a distasteful one, but I, for one, do not despair of its success."

"It is strange how your advice agrees with that

of Father Bernhard, and how it differs from that received in a letter yesterday from the Archbishop of Weidenbruck. Assuredly Providence has set me in a position of overwhelming difficulty."

In spite of my contempt I pitied her. Hypocrite that she was, she had quite deceived herself into the belief that she was a noble martyr. How could I, who had fostered that delusion, blame her for it. The coachman, in obedience to my command had pulled up his horses. Before us rose the rectangular mass of the Marienkastel, and on its right the wooden crow's nest which over-looked the Kastel run. The sun shone brightly in the heavens, and the royal conveyance cast a crisp blue shadow on the snow-carpeted roadway. All was silent till with a jingling of bells a peasant sleigh swung past us with its bronzed occupants and a close packed burden of wine casks. There was a low murmured salutation to my exalted companion, and the vehicle disappeared round a bend in the road, leaving us to ourselves and our agitating dilemma.

"When doctors disagree in a matter of physical health," I said, "one must rely on one's own common sense. When friends give divergent advice on a moral question, the only thing is to rely on one's conscience."

The Queen, who had been gazing straight in front of her with a far-away look in her eyes, turned her glance upon me.

"Is that the only guide," she said. "May not the heart speak also?"

Her eyes were wet with tears, and there was plead-

ing in her voice. It seemed then, that her affection for the Grand Duke was genuine, if misplaced, and her appeal to me as a sort of moral counsellor was flattering in the extreme.

“The heart is an unruly organ,” I replied. “No one, not even the Archbishop of Weidenbruck, would advise you to let your affections for the Grand Duke——”

Again a hand was laid on my arm. “I was not thinking of the Grand Duke,” she said.

In a second I had leaped from the royal sleigh and was standing in the snow of the roadway. I was in a dream and my brain swam as the incredible but unmistakable purport of her words forced themselves on my staggering senses. If I needed confirmation of my unpleasant conclusion, I could read it in the Queen’s shamefaced but appealing glance. A great wave of disgust swept over me. This woman, whose knowledge of me was of the slightest, whose acquaintance with me was of the briefest, had laid her sickly, shallow soul at my feet, to pick up or trample on as my fancy dictated. True, I had been to blame, but the moral obliquity of a gallant bachelor compared to that of a disloyal wife is as the summer dew to the torrential thunder shower. Not, I fear, that it was her sinfulness that disgusted me, so much as the miserably fickle nature it suggested. I looked at the red-bearded coachman on the box. He sat bolt upright looking straight in front of him, but to my excited fancy his ears seemed strained to catch my answer to those monstrous words.

"You are not thinking of the Grand Duke," I said sternly ; "then of whom are you thinking?"

"Of you," she murmured almost inaudibly.

For the moment I had it in my heart to strike her.

"I thought," I said contemptuously, "that you were a religious woman."

"You misunderstand me," she said quickly. "Before Heaven I am a virtuous woman, but my heart cries out for sympathy. You, who know my wretched fate, who understand me so well, why should you deny me your sympathy? The soul purifies all things."

"Even the infidelities of the heart," I sneered.

"Ah! You are hard."

"As hard as steel," I assented, "and as true."

For a moment she looked me full in the face, and I met her glance without a shadow of weakening. Her eyes pleaded, questioned, and received their silent answer. If I anticipated a culminating burst of tears, I was wrong. There was a sudden hardening of her expression, and her eyes glinted with anger.

"Coachman," she cried harshly and in German, "drive on to the Marienkastel."

For a moment I stood there watching the departing sleigh. Then I remembered myself and took off my hat.

CHAPTER XII

MOODILY I walked on up the hill in the track of the royal sleigh. I was annoyed, partly by the turn events had taken, and partly because I could hardly, in view of the Queen's presence at the Marienkastel, carry out my intention of calling there. And yet I was unwilling to be disappointed of my bob-sleighing, unwilling to miss an opportunity of developing my relations with the Princess, and exceedingly unwilling to fail in an appointment I had made. Fortune, however, delivered me out of my dilemma. Just as I halted before the castle gates within which the royal sleigh was now waiting, the sound of voices and laughter met my ears. Looking round, I saw issuing from a side door, the Princess Mathilde, Max and a small boy of about eight or nine years of age attired in a miniature replica of the ordinary tobogganer's costume. The Princess hailed me with unaffected enthusiasm.

"Hurrah! you *have* come," she cried. "Come and help us get the 'bob' out."

Max took a cigarette out of his mouth in order

to yawn more freely, and favoured me with a nod and a drawled "Good-afternoon."

"Oh, this is Stephan," went on the Princess. "Stephan, shake hands with Mr. Saunders."

The little prince offered me his hand with a bright smile. He was a handsome, aristocratic-looking little fellow, very natty in his woollen jersey and white leggings, and evidently as happy at the prospect of "bob-sleighting" as a healthy-minded boy of his years should have been.

Our united efforts were employed in lugging the bob-sleigh from its shed, and bringing it on to the Riefinsdorf road.

The Princess settled herself in front placing her feet firmly against the iron crossbar and grasping in her hands the ends of the steering gear. Behind her sat Stephan, and behind him myself. At the end was Max with the strong iron levers which worked the brake ready to either hand.

They have a regular bob-sleigh track now at Weissheim, but in those days we "bobbed" down the ordinary road, a nuisance to horse-sleighs and a danger to pedestrians. Nevertheless it was an extremely enjoyable experience. At first the "bob" hardly moved over the hard rutty snow, and we had to work our bodies backwards and forwards in unison like rowers in a boat, to jerk our heavy craft onward down the slight incline. Then little by little the pace began to increase, and we travelled smoothly and fairly rapidly down the long gradual hill. There was no question of "braking" yet, but our speed increased steadily if slowly, and as the air beat

against our faces and the white road slid away from beneath us, little Stephan gave vent to cries of satisfaction and delight.

"Isn't it lovely," cried the Princess.

"We have nothing like it in London," I replied, thinking of City Atlases and the Twopenny Tube.

"Lean to the right," cried out Max suddenly, and at the command we swung our bodies as far over as we dared and stretched out our right arms to their full extent. The result was that we got round a sharp bend of the road without the necessity of braking, and the speed we had developed was unchecked. We were progressing now at a considerable pace and the farther we went the swifter grew our course. The fascination of speed is one that appeals, passively or actively, to almost everyone, and that swift rush through perfect air is a thing I shall not hastily forget. There was incident too, as well as the matchless spectacle of snowy pines and gleaming declivities. Every turn of the road was an occasion for leaning over to one side with the possibility of a rough upset if the brakesman's judgment failed him or the hand of the steerer temporarily lost its cunning. But Max was a clever if apparently reckless brakesman, and though once or twice in rounding corners we went perilously near the edge of the roadway, he always saved us from disaster by judiciously checking our speed for a moment and then letting us rip along again down the straight with a velocity that fairly took my breath away. Just as we were passing the Brun-varad we sighted a horse-sleigh heavily

laden with sacks of corn toiling up the road in the opposite direction to ourselves.

"Achtung!" cried the Princess shrilly, as we flew along towards the slow labouring conveyance, but the sleepy driver paid no attention to the cry.

"Achtung!" came little Stephan's high treble and Max's angry bass simultaneously, and the man pulled hurriedly at his horse's head.

"Brake, Max!" cried the Princess, and I felt the tail end of the bob raised up as the strong iron teeth were driven suddenly and fiercely into the firm snow. Our pace was checked considerably, but we were still travelling at an alarmingly high speed. My heart was in my mouth, for the sleigh had not had time to pull properly out of our way, and it seemed to me that we must either go into the horse on one side or charge the snow bank which masked the precipice on the other. What would be our fate in the latter event I had happily no time to think. As a matter of fact a bob-sleigh is a narrow craft and we had a gap of a few feet between the equine Scylla and the niveous Charybdis, and through this the Princess steered us with the nerve of a veteran and the heart of a Valkyrie.

"Brake off!" shouted the dauntless Mathilde.

"Well steered," I breathed, peering ahead for fresh obstacles to our lightning descent.

As we neared the town of Weissheim the road broadened and the descent became perceptibly gentler. Slower and slower grew our course, till finally, as we came to a tall red post bearing the laconic inscription :—

SCHRITT

BUSSE, 2 KRONEN

Max put on the brake and brought our trusty craft to a standstill.

"We mustn't 'bob' through the town," explained the Princess as we regained our feet, and proceeded to tow the weighty sleigh through the almost level main street of the town.

"Under a penalty of two Krone," I supplemented.

"Two Krone be hanged!" said Max. "We don't want to offend the Bürgerschaft. That's the worst of these infernal politics."

"And you like 'bobbing,' Stephan?" I asked.

"It's lovely," he replied. "I like passing the sleighs, don't you?"

"Immensely," I replied. "Like you, I have nerves of iron."

After we had passed through the town and had got as far as the Pariserhof, we settled ourselves on the 'bob' again and commenced the second half of our downward journey. The way was steeper now than it had been before, the corners sharper, and the precipices more alarmingly abrupt. Nevertheless Max and his sister performed their respective duties with coolness and precision, and we glided swiftly but safely past Riefinsdorf and along the Heldersburg road till we came to the spot where I had met the Princess on the previous afternoon. Here the declivity ended and a slight ascent commenced, so disembarking once more we pulled

the bob-sleigh to the edge of the road and surveyed the scene.

"That straight bit just after Riefinsdorf was good, wasn't it?" said the Princess wiping her streaming eyes.

"It enables me to comprehend the expression I saw on a man's face to-day when he spoke of tobogganing," I replied. "He seemed intoxicated with a debauch of speed."

"You should go down the Kastel run," put in Max, "if you want speed. You go twice as fast as bob-sleighing. Eighty miles an hour with your nose within twelve inches of the ice is a tolerably exciting sensation for the uninitiated."

"*Festina lente*," I said, "which being interpreted means, don't try the Kastel run till you've practised on the Thal or the Children's run."

"Miss Anchester told me you proposed going down the Kastel run straight away," said the Princess.

"Miss Anchester," I retorted, "has no right to repeat the foolish statements of a presumptuous novice."

At this moment a sleigh appeared on the scene travelling in the direction of Riefinsdorf and Weissheim.

Max stopped it and bargained with the driver to take our bob-sleigh in tow as far as the Marienkastel. A satisfactory arrangement having been come to we tied the "bob" to the tail of the sleigh and, seating ourselves thereon, enjoyed the calm delights of a secure and unexcitingly placid ride.

As we passed the Brun-varad on our upward journey the sound of firing met our ears. I should have paid the matter no consideration whatever but for the look of anxious inquiry which the Princess darted towards her brother.

"It's only the soldiers firing at the ice target on the Nonnensee," replied Max, in answer to her look, and the elaborate yawn which followed his remarks would have convinced me that his prosaic explanation was the true one, had not something occurred to re-arouse my latent apprehension. There was a sleigh drawn up by the roadside, and as we passed it the emblazoned panels of the door attracted my attention. Looking up, I saw that it was the identical vehicle in which I had journeyed towards the Marienkastel that afternoon, and what was more, that the Queen herself was in it, standing up and gazing steadfastly at the direction from which the sound of firing proceeded. Her face was pale, her expression one of tense anxiety, and as a spluttering series of shots rang out in quick succession, her lips moved with the involuntary utterance of extreme agitation. I looked at the red-bearded coachman. To my surprise he seemed as agitated as the Queen herself. His body was twisted on the box, his dark eyes seemed starting from his head, while his right hand clutched the brake lever as if in an agony of apprehension. The whole thing was absolutely incomprehensible to me.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"They are shooting at the ice target on the Nonnensee," drawled Max, and yawned again.

The Princess Mathilde shivered. Whatever it was, I was powerless to interfere, and I could only trust and pray that either Max's explanation was true, or that if violence had been attempted against any innocent person, it had failed of its object.

Slowly we toiled up to the gates of the Marienkastel, and then, casting loose from the friendly sleigh, we essayed a second run in the direction of Riefinsdorf. This time I felt neither pleasure in speed nor apprehension for possible disaster. My thoughts were busy in another channel. The sound of firing had ceased now, the royal sleigh had passed on its way back to the Brun-varad, but the vision of the Queen's agitated form, the remembrance of the coachman's writhing apprehension, haunted my brain with a chilling, disquieting insistence.

That some player in the restless drama of Grimland politics had been the mark of those vicious rifle shots I felt convinced. Humble or exalted, a friend to King Karl or a foe, I had no means of knowing. Had he escaped, I wondered, or was some poor fellow's life blood staining the virgin snow, some wound mortifying in that terribly frosty air. A sharp curve of the road brought the whole range of the Klauigberg before us, a dazzling trinity of mighty summits piercing the violet sky. What a pity it was, I reflected, that such a beautiful country should be spoilt by the reckless machinations of insignificant men. If the snowclad peaks that faced us had any lesson for mankind it was assuredly peace and stability they preached. I could understand the men of the desert being fierce, the northern

sea-farers cruel, the dwellers about the Mediterranean sensuous and slothful, But here, if nature can at all affect the minds of men, the people should have been calmly virile, steadfastly loyal, stainless of crime as the unblemished snows of their towering hillsides, pure in their affections as the clear sweet colours of their chastely glowing sunsets. I thought of South Kensington with its red brick terraces, its stucco crescents, its formal abhorrence of nature and natural objects, and I reflected that there was greater virtue and more effective energy behind those pseudo-classical porches, within those imitation walnut doors, than in the whole range of this unmarred countryside. It was not till we came to the straight bit just beyond Riefinsdorf that I regained a normally cheerful outlook, the extra bit of speed driving the moody thoughts out of my head and forcing me to realise that there are worse things in the world than tearing down a snow slope at forty mile an hour with a young and beautiful princess steering you to a safe termination. As we came to a stop the Princess looked round at me and laughed.

"You look very red in the face," she said.

"We all wear a good colour," I replied, which, with the exception of Max, was true enough.

"I did not say you were a good colour," she retorted, "I said you were very red. I don't admire red men."

"I should be glad to know your idea of manly beauty," I said. "Is it something white with spots on it?"

"Don't be horrid," she said, as we turned our

steps again towards Riefinsdorf, where we counted on getting a horse to drag the bob-sleigh back to its home at the Marienkastel. "I like men with aquiline noses and big black moustaches. There is a magnificent creature who teaches skating on the Pariserhof rinks whom I am desperately in love with."

"All girls go through that stage," I said quietly, "you will get over it."

"Oh, I hate you."

"You will get over that too."

"I suppose you think I shall fall in love with you."

"That," I said more calmly than ever, "is one of the things you will not get over."

The Princess raised her arm as if to strike me in mock anger, but remembering that we were almost strangers restrained herself.

"I wish it would thaw," she said.

"Why?"

"Because then I could make snowballs to throw at you."

I laughed at the whimsical connexion of ideas, and the Princess, to whom laughter was as necessary as air and food, laughed too.

She ceased abruptly and of a sudden the twinkling black eyes grew fixed and apprehensive.

I followed her gaze, and what I saw swept out the merriment from my heart in an instant, and brought back the dark and gloomy meditations with a rush.

A small sleigh was being pulled along the road by

a couple of peasants, and on it lay something covered, but not concealed, by a white sheet.

Beside it walked a group of high-booted, sombrely-clad police officials, and I noticed that people who passed the sleigh cast a glance of curiosity and pity on its burden, and doffed their hats.

We stood aside to let it pass, and as Max and I removed our caps, the Princess took Stephan's woollen covering from his head.

CHAPTER XIII

WE walked as far as the palace in silence. The Princess was obviously dejected, and, I myself the prey to a depression I could neither analyse nor understand. The mute rigid thing on the sleigh had seemed a terrible rebuke to my ill-timed flippancy. In the midst of danger and passionate hatred, scheming and sudden death, I had indulged in those frivolous inanities which are in place, if anywhere, only in the environment of a trebly secure and over-polished civilisation. Here, face to face with nature and the primitive passions of violent men, I felt ashamed of myself for my levity, and true to Miss Anchester's opinion of me as a man of unstable mind, fell into a train of unnecessarily pessimistic reflection. At the gates of the Brun-varad we parted with a curtly spoken farewell, and ringing the great bell I was admitted into the Palace. In a corner of the hall Miss Anchester was engaged in giving the young Prince of Weissheim and the Princess a lesson in English grammar. Leaving her charges at my entry she crossed the hall to meet me.

"The King would like to see you, Mr. Saunders," she said quietly. "He is in the Schweigen-kammer."

A distinct feeling of relief swept over me at her words. My host at any rate had not suffered from

the lawless violence of the day, and my joy at his immunity caused me to realise that much of my depression had been a sub-conscious anxiety for the royal person.

"Thank you," I said simply, preparing to mount the stairs in the direction of the "silent chamber."

"I hope you enjoyed your drive with the Queen this afternoon," pursued the Governess in an undertone, as I half turned away to accomplish my errand. I looked inquiringly into her countenance, but searched in vain for a malicious twinkle in her eyes.

"Very much, thank you."

"And I trust," she went on severely, "that you have disabused your mind of the foolish fancies which were troubling it."

I laughed gently. "Quite," I answered. "The mystery of the carnations is explained, and if the explanation wounds my vanity, it is because my vanity was so puffed up that a prick was necessary."

The Governess was obviously puzzled.

"I thought," I went on, "that I was the recipient of a favour from a Queen, whereas I was merely receiving the attentions of a Princess. It was the Princess Mathilde who sent me those flowers, and the mystic inscription which I was dull enough to misconstrue, was merely a playful reminder of my promise to bob-sleigh with the youthful Schatzenbergs this afternoon."

Miss Anchester looked more astonished than ever.

"Is that really true?" she asked.

I had no wish to deceive her, so smiling and

looking her straight in the face I answered, "What explanation could be more simple—or more improbable."

For a moment her grey eyes rested on me questioningly: then they softened, and for the first time I read in them approval. She understood, and vaguely I felt that I had scored.

"The Princess is a sweet girl," she said, with a laudable effort to obtain continuity of speech if not of thought.

"Don't say that," I replied, mounting the stairs, "I abominate 'sweet' girls."

I found the door of the Schweigenkammer open, and inside, the King, General Meyer, and Herr Schneider seated at the fateful Zaubertisch. The two former were enjoying big seidles of Lager beer, while the detective was sipping tea from a small blue and gold cup. On my arrival the General rose and closed the door.

"I have to thank you, Saunders," began his Majesty, "for your behaviour this afternoon."

I was genuinely puzzled by this speech and doubtless showed it.

"I mean," pursued the King, "for your behaviour towards her Majesty."

"At lunch?"

"After lunch."

"Her Majesty has told you of our conversation whilst driving to the Marienkastel?" I said more bewildered than ever.

"Not a word," said the King, "but Herr Schneider has given me a faithful and detailed account of it."

"Herr Schneider!"

"The red-bearded coachman," put in the detective triumphantly "Doubtless you imagined him to be the same man who drove you yesterday to Heldersburg."

"No," I retorted, "I did not. My driver of yesterday had a straight flat nose and grey eyes. However it did not occur to me that it was you."

"You are observant," said Schneider pleasantly. "Few people have eyes in their heads, fewer still brains behind their eyes."

"You certainly behaved well in a trying situation," continued the King, "I am sorry that any guest of mine should have been put to such annoyance. I only trust that you will not sicken of our curious habits in these parts and leave us desolate. Loyalty is at a premium just now at Weissheim."

King Karl certainly had a very pleasant way of putting things, and assuredly I was far too interested in the situation to desire to put myself out of touch with it.

"I ask nothing better than to continue to enjoy your Majesty's hospitality," I said.

"After all," said the King, "an eventful existence has its charm, even for me, who enjoy few lucid intervals of placidity. To-day, for instance, I was fired upon."

"The shots I heard whilst bob-sleighing!"

"No doubt. I don't much mind being fired at, but I don't take it kindly from my own Guards. We were ski-ing on the lower slopes of the Klaninberg, I, Meyer, and my guide Otto, and the Guards were

practising at the ice target on the Nonnensee some couple of hundred feet beneath us. They are good shots, these fellows, and the bullets whistled round us like hailstones. Poor Otto was shot through the lungs. Meyer and myself were untouched."

"And yet," sneered the General, "King Karl does not believe in the Divine right of Kings."

"No, nor yet in the Divine right of Commanders-in-chief," snapped the King. "Otto was a brave man. He strove to place his body between mine and the direction of the bullets."

"He has his reward," said the General. "A noble death—one can ask nothing better of Fate. My only regret is that my indifferent skill as a skier left me so far behind your Majesty that I was unable to afford protection to your sacred person."

"When we saw that Otto was beyond human assistance," went on the King. "We took cover as quick as we could in a pine wood. We did not waste time, I assure you, and General Meyer developed an amazing turn of speed for an ordinarily poor ski-er."

"I trust," said the detective, "that your Majesty's objections to removing the Guards to another portion of your dominions is now overcome."

"You forget," said the King drily, "that the incident has been satisfactorily explained. I have received a note from the Colonel regretting that a chance shot from one of his men should have gone wide of the target, and fatally wounded one of my retainers. The dear Duke's expressions of regret are most pathetic."

The detective rose excitedly to his feet.

"I saw the whole thing from the box-seat of the royal sleigh," he cried with a dramatic wave of his right hand. "I saw the officer in command pointing out the objects for his men to aim their murderous bullets at. The Queen saw it, her agitation was supreme. She sobbed bitterly all the way home."

"Doubtless," sneered the King. "I was missed."

"Her Majesty was not in the plot," retorted Herr Schneider.

"How do you know?"

"Because I have looked into her heart. There is no murder there yet."

"I fancy you are right," said the King wearily.

"Her Majesty is not a courageous woman."

"All the same," said General Meyer slowly, "I am inclined to agree with Herr Schneider's advice on the subject of removing the Guards."

"And what do you say Saunders?" asked the King.

Flattered at having my advice demanded on such a matter, I gave it to the best of my ability.

"It is the only possible course, sire," I said.

"So be it," said the King gloomily. "I will give the necessary order. By the way, Meyer, with what regiment do you propose to replace them?"

"The third regiment of Guards," answered the General after a moment's thought. "They are recruited from the loyal and primitive district of Dunkelstein. They would do as well as any other."

"Very good then. We will have them here. Only I must keep Fritz at the Marienkastel."

"I am sure your Majesty is acting wisely," said the detective, sitting down again and noisily finishing his tea. "When your coat has a single hole in it it ceases to be weatherproof. The loyalty of the Guards should be absolute or their title becomes a mockery."

I saw the King's frown deepen at the detective's glib moralising. His spirit had been almost as badly wounded as poor Otto's body, and Schneider, like many exceedingly clever men, lacked tact.

"You need not stay, Saunders," said the King, "if you don't care to. We are going into the details of various schemes for the protection of my worthless carcass. You are quite welcome to our confidences, but I fear they would only bore you. I really wanted to thank you for having behaved like what you are, an English gentleman."

I left the strange trio to their protective schemings. Schneider was pulling out a bundle of papers from his pocket, General Meyer was unrolling a large scale map of Grimland, while between them, emptying the last drops of his Lager beer, was the whimsical, pathetic figure of King Karl.

It wanted still an hour and a half before dinner-time, and after a moment's deliberation I turned my steps in the direction of my own sitting-room with the intention of writing a letter or two, and maybe playing a game of Patience. In the corridor leading to my chamber a tall figure in a long black cassock was walking rapidly towards me. His

head was bent as if in thought, but as he drew near I had no difficulty in recognising in him the King's chaplain, the priest whom the Grand Duke Fritz had so truculently insulted a couple of evenings before. As I passed, his proud eyes flashed a glance at me and he went by with an almost imperceptible gesture of salutation. Then, as if my image had conveyed a tardy recognition to his brain, he stopped and called after me, "Herr Saunders."

"Your reverence."

"I beg your pardon, I am Father Bernhard."

"The King's chaplain?"

"And the Queen's confessor. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"I can spare you exactly an hour and a half."

"Less will be necessary. Kindly accompany me to my apartments."

I followed the dark striding form down several corridors and up many stairs, for Father Bernhard's apartments, as he called them, was a small room at the extreme top of the Waffenthurm. The four walls were bare save for a black crucifix over the narrow bedstead, and there was no heating apparatus whatever in the room. The double windows were wide open and it was bitterly cold, but the priest neither offered to shut them nor apologised for the inhospitable severity of his chamber.

"Mr. Saunders," he began, motioning me to a particularly uncomfortable chair, "you are, I suppose, a Protestant."

"I am."

“Good. I am a broad-minded man, and I regard your chance of Heaven as good as mine. Neither do I suppose that good morals are the exclusive possession of what we arrogantly term, ‘Good Catholics.’ I have had painful evidence to the contrary.”

“The creed has yet to be enunciated which can turn men into plaster saints,” I replied.

“Don’t scoff at religion, Mr. Saunders,” said the priest hastily. “True faith works miracles far more wonderful than all the winking pictures and healing relics which impose on the credulity of the ignorant multitude.”

“I was not scoffing,” I replied in easy self-defence. “I merely stated the obvious fact that implicit faith and unimpeachable virtue do not invariably walk hand-in-hand. Why, when people believe in Heaven as the reward for a virtuous life, sin should have any attraction for them, or death any terrors, is a mystery that I cannot even begin to grapple with.”

“Perhaps you don’t believe in the Devil.”

“I do not.”

“Then that accounts for your blindness. The Devil is a roaring lion, a real, personal, living force, and until you accept that elementary fact your theology and your whole moral outlook will be misty and confused.”

“Very possibly,” I replied, “but I take it that you did not invite me here to talk theology or demonology.”

“No,” said the priest fixing his gaze steadily

upon me, "but the question is a moral one. I want you to leave Weissheim—at once."

"That is a question of convenience and Bradshaw—hardly of morals."

"I do not think you misunderstand me," he retorted, still looking fixedly at me.

I did not. This man was the keeper of the Queen's conscience and his meaning was clear.

"There are reasons—moral reasons—why I should remain," I replied after a pause.

"Remember," he said, "that with temptation the truest courage is to fly rather than to fight."

"With temptation, yes," I retorted calmly, "but there is no temptation."

His high forehead wrinkled with mystification. He was obviously incredulous, but my statement had been a definite one, and he was too polite to give me the lie direct.

"What am I to believe?" he asked.

"What are the alternatives?" I countered. "My plain statement, my word of honour if you will, on one hand. On the other, the fanciful asseveration of a hysterical *femme incomprise*."

"The Queen is a beautiful woman," persisted Father Bernhard.

"And I, no doubt, a weak man. Nevertheless, I did not come to Weissheim in search of female beauty, and if I had, there is fresher, healthier beauty here than that of her most painted Majesty."

He ignored my flippancy absolutely. "You are a man of the world?" he asked at length.

"If you will," I answered with a shrug.

"And I a priest, sworn to chastity, and fortified by an unshakeable faith in my holy calling. And yet I tell you, that I——" he broke off suddenly as if in pain.

"Why was I nearly giving you my confidence?" he asked. "You must have a very inviting disposition."

Again I shrugged my shoulders.

"Your confession was as good as made," I said. "You are human and feel some admiration for the Queen."

"Some admiration!" he repeated scornfully. "That is hardly the word. I condemn her utterly in my thoughts, I reprove her daily in my words, and yet I tell you that that woman's image is branded on my soul to the obliteration of all, or nearly all, that was ever good therein."

"Nonsense," I said good-naturedly. "You are a very good man, and like most good men are exceedingly simple. You wrap your poor little heart in swaddling clothes to protect it from the evil winds that blow, and when, poor delicate thing, it meets a faint, sickly breath of sentiment it suffers from acute inflammation. Treat your feelings as you do your body," I went on, pointing to the open window, "expose them to the four winds of heaven, and they will harden and grow healthy. Try and be normally human. Shut your eyes to temptation like a priest, and it becomes a roaring devil. Open your eyes to it like a man, and you will see what rotten stuff it's really made of."

Father Bernhard smiled sadly. "Behold!" he

said, "the layman preaches to the priest, and what is more, I believe he is the better preacher of the two." He sighed heavily. "I can take it, then that your affection for the Queen is not serious."

"Man alive!" I cried laughing, "it is non-existent. We have hundreds like her in London only we do not call them Queens."

The priest rose to his feet with a look of reproof, and then paced his narrow chamber with long strides.

"My mind is warped," he cried bitterly. "Because that woman's image is planted in my morbid and unhealthy soul I cannot realize that you are free from a similar obsession."

"Why don't you practise what you preach? I asked, "and flee temptation."

"Because," he retorted instantly, "because there is danger here, real physical danger for myself and all who hold the King's cause dear."

"I, too, am devoted to his Majesty," I said quietly. "Therefore you see that the policy of flight is impracticable in my case also."

Father Bernhard abruptly ceased his perambulations, and fixed his piercing glance upon me.

"The King was good enough to favour me with his views of your character," he said, "I am inclined to think they were correct. *Au revoir*. I am dining at the royal table to-night. We shall meet later."

CHAPTER XIV

IF you are touched in the lungs or shattered in the nerves, go to Weissheim. If you are overworked, under-fed, or blighted in love ; if you are run down in mind, body or estate, go to Weissheim. If, on the other hand, you are sound in wind and limb, in purse and mind, in body and soul, assuredly and by all means go to Weissheim. The air, the sky, the sun, are medicine for the sick, champagne for the healthy, with this advantage, that the more you take of them the better are the after-effects. I don't think I have ever had a better time in my life than those first few weeks on that exalted plateau. The sun shone with unvarying graciousness, the thermometer remained consistently below zero, and the air was as ever, still, exhilarating, pine-laden, divine !

Into the sports and pastimes of the place I threw myself with the enthusiasm of an able-bodied novice, determined at all costs to rival and excel the regular habitués of the place. I could have had no better instructors. At skating General Meyer, the finest performer in Grimland, initiated me, on the flooded rinks of the Pariserhof into the subtle points which differentiate the Weissheim style from any other in the world. In bob-sleighing the Prinzessin

Mathilde taught me how to steer round the sharp turns of the Riefinsdorf road without forcing the brakesman to spoil the time of the run. It was fine sport that bob-sleighing, whether you steered from the front or whether you manipulated the brake from behind, or even if you were only a passenger in the middle, as I was at first and little Stephan always. The slow easy start, the gradually augmenting speed, and then the smooth frictionless rush till the "bob" seemed to take the bit between its teeth and tore down the straight and skidded round the curves like a wild animal that had not had any exercise for a week.

It was so sociable, too, sitting one behind another, that after a few journeys one never bothered about the precipice on one side of the roadway or the pine trees that grew so perilously close down on the other; and the occasional spills which sent us all sprawling anyhow into the snow, were the best fun of all.

At curling I could have had no better instructor than his Majesty the King. He was as keen on the game as any Scotsman, and besides being a very skilful performer was such an excellent strategist that he was invariably voted "skipper" of his side at this the most democratic game in the world. I can see him now standing broom in hand directing his men from the "house."

"Now Number three," he would call out, "I want you to draw to the tee, tee strength and no more—and I don't mind if you chip the guard away. Play on my besom in-handle. Well laid

man!" Then as the granite bowl slithered along the ice, spinning on its own axis towards the desired spot, his face would be a picture of concentrated and watchful anxiety.

"Let it curl, let it curl," he would cry to the other members of his side who followed it down its course ready at a word to sweep their willing hearts out if the shot seemed weak.

"Now sweep—sweep boys, all you know. Oh man, you've done it—it's a daisy. Come and look at it. *Sehr gut gespielt!*"

The last expression never failed to provoke a laugh from his opponents and a thrill of satisfaction to the happy recipient of the compliment.

My afternoons I divided evenly between hockey on the ice, "bandy" as they call it, and tobogganing. The former I regard as the finest game in the world, the latter as the finest sport, and though the game is better exercise, a more sociable and consistent pastime, it provides no sensations like those of the toboggan run. In this Miss Anchester was my instructor. She made me start on the Children's run, and laughed unmercifully when I went over the first bank and took a header into the deep soft snow.

"Never mind," I said, as I picked myself out; "I'll beat your record time on the Kastel run some day."

"And yet you say you're not conceited," she retorted laughing.

Piqued by her raillery, I devoted my whole energy to mastering the difficult art of steering my erratic

and treacherous craft till I could negotiate the Children's run as well as little Stephan or the Duke of Weissheim.

I next turned my attention to the Thal run, which instead of being snow like the Children's run had been iced, and consequently was much faster. For this I purchased rakes for my boots, and pads for my knees and elbows. My first efforts were not conspicuously successful. The pace of the thing beat me altogether and I went first into one bank and then into the other, and in spite of the fact that I dug my rakes viciously into the track, my toboggan seemed deliberately to run away with me. Up the banked-up curves it rushed skidding down again with an uncomfortable sideways motion, banging me violently into the counter bank till, in spite of my pads, I was aching in knees and elbows, and felt exactly as if some one was playing battledore with me for the shuttlecock. Finally, in despair I gave up digging my rake into the ice and let the thing rip along in its own wicked way, just tapping the ice with one foot when I came to a corner, and throwing my weight to one side. Then, strange to say, I got along quite comfortably, and kept more or less to the centre of the track without those elbow-shattering cannonadings with the adamantine ice-banks.

On the other hand the pace began to develop alarmingly, and I felt more apprehensive than I should have cared to admit. The wind whistled in my ears, the sides of the track raced past me, and I realised that a momentary loss of nerve, an

inconsiderable error of steering, and something sudden and disastrous would befall me. My relief at getting to the bottom was great, though the sudden dash from the smooth ice track into the deep snow at the termination of the run was disconcerting in its abruptness.

I found Miss Anchester, who had made a descent just before me, waiting at the lower end of the course.

"You should rake a bit at the end," she said, "otherwise you get carried out into the deep snow and have a job to wade back."

"Your remarks as always are full of point," I replied, struggling with difficulty back to the firm path which bordered the toboggan run.

"Still," continued the Governess patronisingly. "You did not do a bad course. We shall get you on to the Kastel run soon."

"Is that faster than this?"

"About twice as fast and much longer. Why? Is your nerve giving way?"

"Not a bit," I answered. "The Thal run is good in its way, but a trifle slow."

Miss Anchester smiled.

"Now tell me," she said, "are you ready to make a second descent?"

My aching elbows pleaded hard for a respite, and my spirit rebelled at the thought of those disquietingly sudden bends. All the same I hardened my heart.

"Absolutely," I replied. "Allow me to drag your toboggan up for you."

"Thanks, I can manage my own. I will watch you from half-way this time."

I am not more deficient in nerve than most men, but I must plead guilty to a slight feeling of apprehension as I waited my turn for my second journey down the Thal run.

I noted how an English lady started, sitting on her schlitli with both feet planted flatly and firmly on the track so that her speed should never develop beyond the most modest limits—and I longed for moral courage to do the same. Then as she disappeared sedately round the bend, a sunburned peasant-boy blew a shrill whistle from a point of vantage, and the next in order, a blue-chinned Grimlander, made ready for his journey. Pipe in mouth, unpadded at the elbows, his boots devoid of rakes, he shoved off lazily with his big hands, and sped with rapidly increasing speed beyond our view.

Next came an Englishman arrayed like myself, and when the whistle sounded he ran a few yards with his machine, and then flung himself violently upon it so as to develop his top speed with the least possible delay.

I awaited the blowing of the next whistle with an excitement which I tried to persuade myself was pleasurable. There were onlookers at the start, and with a laudable attempt at insouciance, I hurled myself gaily on to the toboggan in the admired manner of my immediate predecessor. Mindful of the comparative success of the latter half of my previous journey, I forebore to use my rakes more

than was absolutely necessary. The result was a gratifying absence of bumps, and an increase of speed which absolutely terrified me. I went round the first bend like a flash of lightning. Before I had time even to think of steering I was on the second, and I took it perilously high. In the little bit of straight that followed I had a brief vision of the Governess' upright form poised on the summit of the inside bank at my next corner.

In an insane desire to demonstrate my skill and confidence I lifted my feet well above the ice track, scorning my rakes, and foolishly ostentatious of my scorn. Onward I rushed, a strong mixture of fear and exaltation in my heart, and as I felt myself speeding beneath the cool grey eyes of my critical coach I strove to banish all tenseness from my features, and assume a look of mildly pleasurable unconcern. What followed I cannot exactly describe, as far as my sensations were concerned, though my fate was a natural and not uncommon one. Dashing at the next bank without any preliminary raking, and trusting to the steep curved wall of ice to bring my toboggan round, I shot high up the gleaming green rampart and for a moment—and a moment only—my heart beat with fiercer, wilder exaltation than before. Then my right runner rose a fraction of an inch above the top of the bank, and in an instant I was hurtling through space with the velocity of a stone from a sling. The seconds of my falling were the longest of my life. Still hugging my toboggan closely, I bumped into the compact snow which backed the ice wall, falling,



“ On either side of me knelt a beautiful young woman.”

rebounding, falling—should I never stop? The pain and shock of the impact were lost in the fear of what was coming, in the desperate wonder when my horrible travelling would come to its nerve-shattering conclusion.

The actual memory of my first halt is lost to me, for, as I discovered subsequently, I ran my head against some hard snow banked up round the base of one of the telegraphic poles which follow the course of the Thal run. When I regained consciousness I was under the firm impression that I was dreaming. Not only were my faculties subacute, and my being permeated by a sensation of delicious comfort and repose, but my eyes rested on a vision such as I had never expected to behold in my waking moments. On either side of me knelt a beautiful young woman, and, to my obfuscated senses, their faces wore an expression of the deepest sympathy and concern. I lay motionless and speechless as I was, dreading by thought or movement to break the thread of slumber and lose the rapturous vision in the unprosaic realities of awakening. Then, as my mind began to work more normally, it occurred to me that the dream was a singularly vivid one, that the faces bending so tenderly over me were far more definite than the dream faces which haunt the slumbers of a youthful bachelor, and suddenly, and with something of a shock, the memory of what had happened came back to me. I had had a spill tobogganning, and was lying couched in the soft snow. On one side of me was the royal Governess and on the other

the Princess Mathilde, and womanlike they were rather alarmed at the severity of my tumble.

I looked up into the face of the young Princess. Her dark eyes were troubled with a look of unmistakeable concern, and her pretty mobile features wore such a sweet air of sympathy that in spite of a slight feeling of amusement I was quite touched.

"I'm all right," I said, smiling.

"You've had a nasty fall," she said quietly, "and you must keep perfectly still. Do you think a little brandy would do him good, Miss Anchester?"

I turned to the Governess.

Now that I had regained the full possession of my senses, I saw that Miss Anchester's expression of tender solicitude had merely been the figment of my shaken brain. Her healthy young face was cool and serious enough, but the calm eyes were as practical and unemotional as ever.

"No," she said decisively. "Brandy is the worst thing possible for a knock on the head. Do you think you can manage to walk, Mr. Saunders?"

"I'm sure I can," I answered.

"No, no, don't try," put in the Princess hastily. "We'll send a sleigh for you and bring you home on it."

"If you'll allow me to try," I said, "I think you'll find I'm more frightened than hurt."

Suiting the action to the word I rose to my knees. Then, with a further effort, I struggled to my feet. As I did so the white world raced round me, and the sky above seemed waving and sagging like an intensely blue awning. Then as things grew grad-

ually still and clear again, I discovered that my companions were supporting me on either side.

"Thanks," I said, "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance. I suppose I went over the bank."

"You ought to have raked," said Miss Anchester severely, "there aren't half a dozen men who can go down the Thal run without raking."

"I'm afraid I'm not one of them," I said gloomily, "but I may be later. Has any one ever been down the Kastel run without raking?"

Miss Anchester looked at me as if my senses must still be errant to have suggested such a thing.

"No," she said curtly; "and please don't try. If you go over David, you won't get off with a severe shaking I can tell you."

"Or find two ministering angels at the bottom either," I added. "By the way, Princess, where do you come from?"

"I was ski-ing," she said, slightly raising one foot to demonstrate her foot-gear. "I saw some one shoot over the bank and I hastened up to see if I could be of any assistance. I had no idea it was you. I do hope you're not hurt."

"I'm quite right again now, thanks," I said; "in fact I think I'll have another go at the Thal run just to show there's no ill-feeling."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Miss Anchester peremptorily. "One wants all one's wits toboganning, and that yours are somewhat shaken is proved by your suggestion."

Her authoritative manner piqued me, all the more

because it covered a certain measure of common sense.

"Please don't go down again to-day, Mr. Saunders," pleaded the Princess. "You'll be much steadier to-morrow."

"I yield to your combined eloquence," I said, "though personally I disapprove of stopping after a fall. I don't like leaving off when I'm beaten."

"There are plenty of people like that in the world," said Miss Anchester. "They usually come to a bad end."

"We all come to a bad end sooner or later," I retorted. "The great thing is to fight strenuously till Fate conquers us, as it ultimately must, by brute force."

"What a hopelessly unspiritual outlook!"

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but when one has just charged a telegraph pole one's pessimism is forced to the surface. A cup of hot chocolate and a Weissheim bun will render me a thoughtless, foolish optimist again."

"I hope you won't knock yourself up before our ball," said the Princess.

"When is that?"

"On the sixth of February. It is an annual affair at the Marienkastel and rather fun."

Rather fun! What a splendid and wonderful temperament one must possess to regard a State ball as fun!

"I will try and keep myself sound for it," I said. "Dancing seems a popular amusement at Weissheim."

At the Princess's suggestion we walked together

to an old-fashioned pastrycook's on the outskirts of Weissheim kept by a certain Frau Mengler.

"We shall see," I said, as we entered the low doorway, "whether hot chocolate proves as successful in cheering the moral outlook as I hope."

"I don't think there's much wrong with your moral outlook," said the Princess.

"Then I'm afraid you're not a judge of moral outlooks," said Miss Anchester, smiling.

"Perhaps I'm not," admitted the Princess, "but I'm a very good judge of hot chocolate."

"Frau Mengler," I said, "bring three cups of your best hot chocolate and an improved moral outlook."

"Where shall we sit?" asked the Princess after indulging in a vivifying peal of her usual uncontrolled laughter.

"If the Princess Mathilde is going to have one of her laughing fits," said Miss Anchester, "I think we had better go into the inner room."

Crossing the shop I opened the door which led into the second apartment. Seeing it already occupied I was about to close the door again when my eyes rested with surprised recognition on the couple in possession. Of these one was Herr Schneider, the detective, and the other, a huge plate of éclairs and cream buns before her, the Fräulein Von Helder. The tête-à-tête was a sufficiently remarkable phenomenon in itself, but what puzzled and amused me so much that I hesitated a moment before closing the door, was the undisguised rapture expressed on the animal features of the

Queen's Maid of Honour. I shut the door quietly, noticing that Herr Schneider was displaying his best manners, which were horrible, and doubtless, I reflected, pursuing his professional researches by an unprincipled but successful simulation of the tender passion.

"What is the joke?" asked the Princess, noticing my smile.

"The room is engaged," I said, "and so I fancy are the couple within."

"Engaged?" queried my two lady friends simultaneously.

"I may be premature," I admitted.

"Who are they?" demanded the Governess.

"My fellow-guest, Herr Schneider," I replied, "and the celebrated court beauty, Fräulein von Helder."

"But——" Miss Anchester's amusement was as great if not quite so uncontrolled as the Princess's. "What grounds have you for your remarkable assertion?"

"In the first place," I replied, "I have the facial expression of the happy pair, which was sublimely ludicrous. Secondly, there is the presumed fact that Herr Schneider is paying for the Fräulein's tea, no slight matter even in an inexpensive tea-shop."

"Your arguments are eloquent but unconvincing," said Miss Anchester. "Herr Schneider is not the man to fall lightly in love, and the Fräulein von Helder is not the sort of person who would appeal to his somewhat world-worn sentimentality."

"You are a poor judge of character, Miss Anchester," I said. "You think me conceited because I feel confident of breaking your record time on the Kastel run, and now you are calling the ingenuous Herr Schneider world-worn, and denying him the capacity for spontaneous emotion. Wait till you see the infatuated pair come out."

"If the Fräulein's appetite is up to the mark," said the Princess, "we may have to wait a long time."

"I am prepared to wait a long time," I replied. "Frau Mengler's chocolate surpasses my fondest expectations. What I like about Weissheim is, that one meal never influences the next. When I am in London I never take tea for fear of spoiling my dinner. Here I can make a pig of myself four times a day, without fear of reproach."

"You had better make Weissheim your permanent abode," said Miss Anchester. "It is a great thing to realise one's ideals."

"I hope you'll come here in the summer," said the Princess. "It's not quite so lovely as it is now, but the mountain sides blaze with wild flowers in June, and there is any amount of lawn tennis on the Pariserhof courts."

"It sounds very fascinating," I said. "Perfect digestion, perfect scenery, excellent sport. What more can a man demand of life?"

"You had better ask your love-sick friend Herr Schneider," said Miss Anchester. "His wants seem a shade less material than yours."

"Herr Schneider is a beast," I blurted out without thinking.

I expected to be reproved for my bluntness, but the result was quite otherwise.

"I'm so glad you think so," said the Princess. "I think he is a beast too."

I turned to Miss Anchester.

"I think he is the most horrible specimen of humanity I have ever had the misfortune to come across," she said deliberately. "And, for goodness sake, Mr. Saunders," she said, "take care you don't get like him."

"You think there is a danger of that?" I demanded, suspending my cup of chocolate in mid air.

She looked me straight in the eyes smiling at my seriousness.

"I do," she replied simply.

"Confound it!" I ejaculated. "I have had the very same fear myself."

Suddenly the door of the inner room opened, and the subject of our conversation came out. He was dressed in a brown knickerbocker suit and a green Homburg hat with a feather in it. His flat face was wreathed in smiles, and his quick restless eyes recognised us in a second. The Fräulein followed, and her plain heavy features were illuminated with the glow of happiness, a quaint contradiction of half-beautified ugliness, as when the sun shines on a squalid building. Guessing the ill-founded nature of her aspirations I pitied her, and then for some reason or other I felt envious. A passion

that could lend even a reflection of beauty to the Fräulein's homely countenance must be itself a beautiful and wonderful thing. Assuredly it was better to dream one's happiness than to remain awake and miss it altogether.

CHAPTER XV

THIS is not a love story, nor I one who holds that love should be written about in detail like a disease, dissected like a pauper's corpse, or analysed like a malignant growth. Still less should it be put in a show-case for the benefit of the vulgarly curious, labelled and classified according as it is spiritual or animal, passionately overbearing or enduringly circumspect.

Nevertheless, we may say this of love, truly and without offence, that if in its perfection it is a wonderful and sacred thing, it is also in its immature and unperfected state a fair subject for discussion, and, if you will, amused enquiry.

That is why I propose to deal, lightly and briefly, with the incipient flame which first began to smoulder in my own uninflamable bosom. My first sentiments on discovering the outbreak were anger and dismay. I was not in my first youth, and man-like imagined that I had fallen in and out of love at least half a dozen times in my career. And yet, I regretfully admitted, I could no more truly compare these emotional incidents of a past date with my present feelings than I could liken Primrose Hill to the titanic Klauigberg.

It was the morning after my spill on the Thal run

that the true condition of affairs was borne in on my rebellious mind.

In my waking moments, with eyes half closed and senses gradually freeing themselves from the soft chains of slumber, I saw again the pitying trembling glance of the royal Governess as she bent over my shaken prostrate body in the deep snow at the side of the Thal run.

The vision was sweet, as sweet as it was doubtless devoid of all foundation, and yet it roused in my heart a mighty yearning for its truth.

What a majestic thing it would be if I could really draw to a woman's eyes that pictured look of tenderness, of pitying alarm! I had imagined such a thing, and the imagination was incalculably fair, and yet I knew that the one being whom I could wish to gaze upon me thus, was as unemotional as the virgin precipices of the Eisenbahn, as cold as the never-melting snows of the Traualtar.

I got out of bed and called myself a fool, audibly. I had not come to Weissheim to fall in love, but rather to avoid the amorous pitfalls digged for me by scheming mothers, particularly by my own designing parent.

And now I had fallen in love with a woman who neither cared for me, nor was capable of caring for anybody; a beautiful, self-possessed young creature, with a mind of crystal and a heart of ice. Of course it was this very iciness which attracted me—I was not quite such a fool as to ignore that. To one who was accustomed to being indiscriminately gushed upon, there was a distinct fascination in the

contemptuous indifference, the cool criticality with which Miss Anchester habitually treated me. And yet she never avoided me, never, of late at any rate, made herself gratuitously disagreeable, and her very snubbings had a half humorous insincerity about them which made them almost pleasant to receive. Had she sought my society or noticeably avoided it I might have hoped ; but she did neither. Circumstances threw us much together and we were friends, almost as men are friends, but the very frankness of our intercourse was fatal to an atmosphere of sentimentality. Angrily I threw off my pyjamas and stepped into my icy sitzbad. Angrily I soused and splashed myself, and viciously I rubbed myself to a condition of dryness and glowing circulation. And then, more angrily still, I lathered my face with shaving foam till my features were almost as concealed as they had been that memorable afternoon by the borrowed headgear of *Lame Peter*.

In love ! In love with a governess whose interests were divided between her royal charges and the *Kastel* run, and who no more cared for me than she did for the leather strap of her tobogganning pads. It was too humiliating. It was so idiotic too when I came to think of it. In a moment of subconsciousness, I had pictured an expression on her face which nature was incapable of putting there ; and this rotten tap-root of my imagination was feeding a monstrous growth which threatened to usurp my thoughts which should have been occupied with consideration for the King's safety, and

to sap my energies which should have been devoted to bandy, tobogganing, and the curling rink.

In my annoyance I plied my razor with such ill-considered violence that I gashed myself heavily under the right ear.

"Bah!" I cried, surveying the reflexion of the encrimsoned foam in the looking-glass. "Fool is too good a word for you." And with a considerable mental effort to fix my attention on the matter in hand, I resolved to stifle, or at any rate conceal, a passion that was hopeless, unreasoning and contemptible.

The history of my next few days is a history of mental and physical degeneration. I was *distract*. On the curling rink I was a by-word and a shame. Once at a critical moment of the game when my skipper bade me sweep, my thoughts were so far afield that my broom remained idle and motionless in my hand. Yells, Homeric and oft-repeated, failed to reach my inattentive brain, and the stone, which might have been a good one, was doomed to the fate of such as fail to pass the hog-score. Once, on the other hand, I started sweeping energetically according to orders but disregarding the "up besom," which should have terminated my efforts, polished the ice with such misapplied vigour that a promising shot raced fruitlessly through the "house." Such things sound ludicrous, as perhaps they are when viewed in the legitimate perspective of time and distance, but on the actual scene of the occurrence my behaviour was regarded almost in the light of an outrage. At bandy, too, my play was marked by

such a whole-hearted disregard of the rules, to say nothing of the conventions, of the game, that I was looked upon as a bad opponent and a worse ally. At tobogganing alone, at this period, did I make conscious progress, and there the fact that I was under Miss Anchester's eye nerved me to undertakings I should have believed myself incapable of. I tried the Kastel run, and greatly to my surprise, really enjoyed it. The swift, dangerous rush forced my thoughts to concentrate themselves on the matter in hand as nothing else could have done. The penalty for absent-mindedness would have been too severe, more terrible even than the Germano-Scotch recrimination of the curling rink or the Anglo-Saxon profanity of the bandy ground. Wherefore at tobogganing I made unexampled progress and began to do very good times, though never of course getting within measurable distance of Miss Anchester's celebrated record of two minutes twenty-nine and a quarter seconds. At this most fascinating of all sports I had as companion, besides my fair coach, Herr Schneider, the detective, and Max the reckless. The latter, a good tobogganer but an erratic one, improved but slightly on acquaintance. Taciturn rather than actually sulky, his conversational powers were scantily employed, and this in itself was perhaps a fortunate circumstance, for his speech contained a larger proportion of really bad language than I cared about. I disliked the type without considering him a particularly bad specimen thereof, whilst he in his turn began to develop a sort of rough respect for me which was about as

near affection as his curious nature would allow. As for Herr Schneider, if ever there was an enthusiastic tobogganer it was he. Every hour he could spare from his professional duties he spent on the Kastel run, and though he cared little for his "times" or the competitive side of the sport, I don't believe any one took such emotional delights as he did in the pleasures of sheer speed. Walking up again after a descent he would talk ceaselessly the whole way, dragging his toboggan with one hand, and gesticulating freely with the other, and it speaks volumes for his intellectuality that he never for one instant degenerated into a bore.

A frequent spectator was the Princess Mathilde, who tobogganned assiduously on the less dangerous courses but who was forbidden, to her intense annoyance, to venture on the Kastel run. I took a keen delight in her society, and her frank nature left me no doubt that the pleasure was a mutual one. Many a time she and I and Miss Anchester took our five o'clock chocolate together, and those little meetings in Frau Mengler's back parlour are not the least pleasant of my many happy Weisheim memories. Our conversation would frequently turn on Herr Schneider and his marked attentions to the Fräulein von Helder. The Princess would have it that his sentiments were genuine, while Miss Anchester insisted that he was merely amusing himself. Knowing that the man's real motive was solely the extraction of information from the Queen's confidante, and desiring at the same time to keep my knowledge of his duties a profound

secret, I had difficulty in pronouncing an opinion when appealed to as umpire. I got out of the trouble as far as possible by first siding with the Princess and then with the Governess, till at last they united forces in condemning me as an unutterable humbug. All of which was very delightful ; and though Miss Anchester never lost an opportunity of snubbing me, she did it so daintily and with such genuine humour that I often laid myself open purposely to her rebukes.

"Your view of Herr Schneider's sentiments is ridiculous," she said to me one day when I happened to be siding with the Princess. "The man is incapable of a disinterested action."

"I say that he loved her at first sight," I maintained stoutly.

"The Fräulein is rich," was the contemptuous retort.

"Precisely. He loved her at first sight—of her bankbook."

And, as usual, the Princess's musical laughter brought peace and good humour to our badinage.

Any doubts I might have had on the subject of the detective's sentiments were set at rest by that gentleman's perfectly frank declaration on the subject.

I was walking home with him one evening after a very pleasant afternoon on the Kastel run.

"Did you know I was in love, Saunders?" he asked abruptly after dilating in his usual excitable fashion on the glories of tobogganing.

"I knew you were supposed to be," I answered,

"but I took the liberty of doubting the genuineness of your passion."

"You are referring to the *Fräulein von Helder*?"

"Yes," I replied; "were not you?"

He shook his head and snapped his fingers vulgarly. "No," he said, "I might conceivably love a very clever plain woman, but the intelligence of our excellent *Fräulein* is not sufficiently colossal to counteract the exceeding homeliness of her features."

"Then who is the favoured one?"

"The *Prinzessin Mathilde*!"

I whistled.

"You are ambitious," was my comment.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am ambitious, but I am not unpractical. Grimland is a country of ups and downs. A Princess of one day may be a fugitive of the next."

"Also," I said, "a detective of to-day may be the honoured and ennobled friend of royalty, to-morrow."

"Exactly; you put it admirably. Now tell me, as a man of discernment, what do you think of the Princess?"

"A favourable example of the sweetest thing in nature—a budding woman."

"Bravo!" cried my companion. "Love is making you a poet."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed.

"You too are in love, my friend. Do not deny it, for remember, it is my trade to read men's hearts."

You love the Governess and, unlike mine, yours is an unambitious passion, and you will succeed without difficulty ? ”

“ You think so ? ” I demanded eagerly.

“ I am sure of it,” he replied calmly. “ If I can do nothing else I can read hearts. She loves you, my good Saunders, and my only regret is that the little Princess’s sentiments towards myself are not characterised by a like ardour.”

The detective’s words made a considerable impression on me. If he had read my heart aright it was exceedingly probable that his interpretation of the Governess was equally accurate. I had imagined myself in love with an icicle ; the possibility that my affections had been bestowed on a warm-hearted woman capable of appreciating and returning my passion came upon me in the light of a revelation. I took an enormous pleasure in her society, in the mock spiteful banter which we directed so keenly and good-humouredly against each other. Was it not probable, I asked myself, that she herself took at least an equal delight in that barbed persiflage, that something more than her intelligence was pleased by those eloquent discussions in Frau Mengler’s parlour. I hastily made up my mind to put my fortunes to the test, and for the next few days my performances on the curling and bandy rinks were so execrable that for very shame I determined to absent myself therefrom till my mind had been steadied by the joy of assured possession or the bitterness of unalterable defeat.

My opportunities for declaring myself were

numerous, but the actual occasion of my proposal was unsought and unpremeditated. Troubled in spirit by a diabolical error I had made on the curling rink that afternoon, knocking our winning stone out of the "house" and thereby giving our opponents a big "end," I was wandering after a solitary tea down a snow path leading to an open-air shelter overlooking the valley of the Niederkessel.

It was a beautiful walk and a perfect evening, and the complete solitude was soothing to my disturbed spirit. The sun had set behind the mountains, the sky was full of the wonderful colours of a Weissheim sunset, and in their majesty of glowing purity and cool clear radiance they reminded me somehow of the royal Governess. She too was beautiful in an ethereal unpassionate way, as superior in the unblemished purity of her magnificent womanhood as the colours of the Weissheim sky surpassed the murky grandeur of a city sunset.

The buntings twittered over head and the unfrozen Niederkessel murmured responsively a thousand feet below.

I had entered the shelter and actually taken a pipe from my pocket before I perceived that I was not alone. A figure in a white beret and a long blue-grey cloak was already seated there, and a moment later I knew that the object of my late comparison was beside me.

"I beg your pardon," I began, "I did not see you."

"There is no occasion to apologise."

"I was about to smoke."

"You may complete your intention."

"On second thoughts," I replied, putting back my pipe into my pocket. "I will not."

She vouchsafed no further comment, so I proceeded.

"It is a beautiful evening."

She smiled contemptuously.

"It is so beautiful," she said, "that it is really quite unnecessary to make conversation."

"Quite," I retorted. "It is also impossible; under the influence of Nature's majesty conversation makes itself. For instance, I am impelled to say that the beautiful colours of the heaven reminded me of you."

I had taken the plunge, and my heart began to beat rapidly under the emotion of a novel experience.

My companion never moved a muscle. Silent and perfectly still she sat, looking straight before her, but I noticed that the healthy pink of her cheek had taken a deeper hue.

"Is not that rather an obvious sort of compliment?" she asked at length with perfect self-possession.

"Very obvious, I should think."

"I mean, your comparison is commonplace."

"I was not trying to be original. I was merely stating a fact. In some indefinable way the sunset colours reminded me of you. Their beauty and yours have something akin, that is all."

She turned and faced me now.

"And did you walk all this way to talk about

my beauty ? ” she asked, and her tone suggested rising indignation.

“ I did not come here in the expectation of finding you at all. Having done so, I wish to take the opportunity of asking you to be my wife.”

She remained several seconds in silence, and the words of the proverb about those who hesitate recurred joyfully to my mind. Then she said calmly :

“ Mr. Saunders, do you know why you like me ? ”

“ Love you,” I substituted.

“ Why you think you love me then ? ”

“ I could give reasons,” I replied ; “ but I have only an hour and a half to spare.”

She winced as if my poor witticism had caused her pain.

“ Listen,” she said coldly. “ You are attracted to me for the simple reason that I have been—well, rather rude to you. You are accustomed to being sought after, pampered, spoilt. You have had too many warm baths. I have acted upon you as a cold douche. At first it was unpleasant if beneficial, but after a time you came positively to like the icy shower. It was healthy and bracing, and I do myself the honour of believing that you would miss its daily tonic.”

“ I could not exist without it.”

“ So you believe. Had I behaved to you as other girls do, had I behaved to you even as I do towards most men, would you have grown to think you loved me ? ”

“ Possibly not, but the hypothesis is not worth

pursuing. The main fact is that I am asking you to be my wife.

"And my answer is, No."

I rose impatiently from my seat. My opinion after all had been the correct one, not the detective's. I had been making love to an icicle.

"You are not human," I cried bitterly.

"Because I reject your advances? Really you do yourself more than justice."

"But your reasons," I persisted, ignoring her rebuke.

"I could give them, but I have only an hour and a half to spare."

I stamped my foot with annoyance.

"Is this the time for flippancy?" I asked reproachfully.

"You seemed to think so," she retorted quietly.

I looked out at the calming glory of the wondrous heavens. The evening star shone white above the Eisenbahn, like a ship sailing in a sea of exquisite violet. It seemed to flash a message of hope to me. My heart was full, and, as is often the case under the circumstances, my speech was bald.

"Won't you reconsider your decision?" I asked lamely. There was a moment's pause, and then the answer came low and with a suspicion of a break in it.

"Am I the sort of person to reconsider my decision?"

I almost had it in my heart to throw myself at her feet, to seize her hand, to utter a bold "Yes," but pride and a growing anger held me back. I

had done her the highest honour in my power, I had asked her to be my wife, not once but twice. Why should I risk a third and more humiliating rebuff. It might conceivably be possible to thaw the icicle, but was it a man's part to bend lower than I had bent, to ask again what he had been twice denied.

I turned to go, and taking off my cap said frigidly, "We meet at dinner."

"We meet at dinner—as friends. *Au revoir.*"

CHAPTER XVI

I CONGRATULATE you on your victory. It was entirely due to your splendid tackling and accurate shooting."

It was a fortnight after my rebuff related in the last chapter, and the words were addressed to me by Father Bernhard, who took an intelligent interest in the game of bandy.

I had been chosen to represent Weissheim against the picked men of Pulverstadt, an honour which had caused much heart-burnings amongst the more experienced candidates for representative honours.

"I played well," I answered, "as I am now curling well, because I do not care two straws whether I play well or not."

The priest opened his eyes rather wide at my remark. "Come into my room and have a chat," he said.

"Come rather into mine," I replied. "It is not quite so many degrees below zero."

We adjourned accordingly to my comfortable little sitting-room, and I offered my companion a cigar, which he refused.

"I wish to talk to you," he began, selecting the most uncomfortable chair in the room.

"The desire is reciprocated."

"Saunders," he said, fixing his dark eyes seriously upon me, "there is something wrong with you. Your play was brilliant—it won the match for Weissheim—but it was brilliancy of the reckless nature. Another week of such heedless vigour and you will break your neck to a certainty. Of your performances on the curling rink I know nothing except that you are looked upon as a dangerous competitor for the Caledonian medal. But as regards tobogganing, I myself have seen you going down the Kastel run with a ridiculously small amount of raking."

"And consequently doing very good times," I interposed.

"On nine occasions out of ten, yes. But the time will come when you will over-shoot David, and there will be one less competitor for the Grimland Derby. We all admire pluck, but recklessness is a vice. It makes us all uncomfortable, and is hardly fair on your painstaking coach, Miss Anchester."

"My painstaking coach is not over-burdened with sensibility," I retorted. "My decease would affect her far less than the lowering of her record time for the Kastel run."

"You wrong her, I assure you."

"I fancy not. She is above the human weaknesses of love and pity. Her spirit soars aloft about the peaks of the Klauiberg in splendid isolation. It is magnificent, but it is chilly work following it."

"You talk as if you loved her."

"Naturally, my dear Father, for I did love her."

"And you no longer do so?"

"Can one love a piece of marble? Put yourself in imagination before the loveliest piece of statuary that ever left the sculptor's hands. It is altogether admirable, but can you love it? Is not the nearest you can get to loving it, the wish that it could come to life, or that you should meet its replica in flesh and blood?"

"Then I congratulate you on the ethereal nature of your regard."

"Your congratulations are misplaced. Before I came here I was sick of life—blasé, bored, restlessly idle, a rich man without a hobby, a lazy man without the capacity for loafing. The life here did me good. The sport engrossed my mind, the dangerous condition of Weissheim politics stirred my blood, the air, the sun, the gay round of music, theatricals, and fancy-dress balls helped to make a new man of me. I say helped, for a greater cause than all these was that exceedingly important factor in the world's history, a beautiful woman. It was not till I learned that she could never care for me that I realized how extremely pleasant my existence here had been to me, how utterly different from the flat formal round of London's sooty pleasures. And now, well I am not a whiner, but I believe I get less pleasure out of life than the paralytic old folks who warm their frost-bitten toes in the Weissheim alms-houses."

"Disappointment is a bitter thing, but it passes as certainly as the clouds pass."

I shook my head. "Do you know what pain is, Father Bernhard, real hard physical pain, night and day, unrelenting, throbbing, insistent? I tell you there isn't an agony devised by the ingenuity of man that equals the torments of an unrequited affection. You think I am excited and emotional; I tell you no. I was marching straight to happiness and the gates were shut in my face. Do you think I do not picture to myself a thousand times a day the life that lay behind those gates, the life that might have been? Do you think I care two straws now for a knock on the bandy rink or a spill on the Kastel run."

"You need spiritual consolation."

"I need it but am incapable of receiving it. Ah! Father, it's what might have been that tortures us. The fellow who said that a 'sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things,' wrote beautiful English, but shocking bad philosophy. A happy memory is a great asset to a miserable man, but the contemplation of missed happiness is a searing iron night and day."

"You think there is no worse thing than unrequited love?"

"I am certain of it."

"And yet I tell you that requited love may be worse."

"Nonsense," I said impatiently.

"Nevertheless it is so. What if a man love another man's wife; if the man himself is bound by vows of celibacy? Is it not a fearful thing if the woman return the man's guilty passion?"

"A mere hypothetical case," I commented.

"Alas, no; a very actual case. The Queen is beginning to love me."

For the first time for fourteen weary days I took an interest in something.

"You still retain your foolish infatuation for Her Majesty?"

"It grows day by day."

"And nothing I say as to the Queen's character can disillusion you?"

My companion sighed heavily.

"You cannot say anything bad enough of her," he said. "It is the evil in her that appeals to the evil in me. How she discovered my passion is a mystery, for I hid it under a veil of severe austerity and frequent rebuke. But having discovered it my position is unbearable. Unless something happens I must go."

"You know her nature and you love her?" I said. "I cannot understand it."

"That is because you refuse to believe in the personality of the Devil."

"The Devil!" I said. "We do not live in the Middle Ages. I believe in evil, for it is omnipresent, but not in a tangible, visible Prince of Evil. Do you honestly believe in a being with horns and hoof, a curly tail, and an odour of sulphur?"

A slight shudder passed through the priest's frame. "You speak lightly of such things," he said, "as some men speak lightly of their Creator. And yet your flippant description was not an inaccurate one."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have seen him."

At this remarkable assertion I turned uneasily in my chair. A man who confesses to have seen the devil is a man to be watched. All the same I was distinctly interested.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"It was a week ago. I awoke after a fearful dream and there, standing in the middle of my room, was the Prince of the powers of the air, Abaddon the destroyer, and by his side his henchman Aschmedai, the lustful fiend of Tobit."

"A dream," I said.

"It was no dream, or I should have been conscious of waking afterwards. I saw them as plainly as I see you now, and the face of Aschmedai was like the face of Herr Schneider, save that he had horns."

I shuddered involuntarily. The man's delusion was uncanny and his sincerity unmistakeable.

"You neither smoke nor drink," I said, "and from what I have seen of your meals you live chiefly upon prunes and rice. There is a point when self-denial becomes intemperance. Give yourself the advice you once gave me, and leave Weissheim. The air is too strong for your under-nourished brain."

He shook his head sadly.

"I have given myself that advice a hundred times," he said, "but the chains of Abaddon are hard to break."

He left me in a state of great depression, and in my sympathy for him I lost some of the poignancy

of my own distress. His vision of Schneider as a demon struck me as most curious, and as a further example of the repulsion which the detective managed to inspire in the breasts of all he came in contact with. That the Princess Mathilde had the greatest objection to his society was obvious, for that outspoken young lady made little attempt at disguising her feelings. And yet in his oily, ready-tongued way he persisted in his ambitious wooing; always deferential in speech if subtly masterful in his manner, ever heedless of rebuffs, confident with a presumption that was almost admirable in its invincibility.

As this is rather an account of political events during an especially eventful winter, in the especially eventful country of Grimland, than a chronicle of my own feelings, I propose to hasten on to those incidents of European importance wherein my position as King Karl's guest afforded me special opportunities for observation. And yet it seems to me that the part I played in that drama was so influenced by my state of mind that I should have been wrong not to give some indication of the extreme dejection into which I was plunged at this period of my existence. I honestly believe it was the unhappiest period of my life. My sporting successes, which would in the ordinary way have afforded me the keenest satisfaction, merely served to show me how completely my capacity for enjoyment was destroyed. I saw the world through the smoked glasses of disappointment. I knew that the bright colours were there,

but bright and dull looked much alike to me. As for Miss Anchester, after a brief period during which rebuke and raillery gave way to normal manners, she had resumed quickly enough her former rôle of sharp-tongued captiousness. And I, whose heart had gone out irrevocably to a marble image, played my part with an assumption of indifference for which the unconquerable sentiment of human pride was alone responsible. As a tobogganing coach she was admirable, critical but never unjust, and had she put a little more warmth into her commendation of meritorious efforts she would have been a faultless trainer. As it was I so improved under her tuition that I became second favourite for the Grimland Derby at the short odds of four to one. I can give no idea of the extraordinary interest aroused by that important event in the minds of Weissheimers, natives and visitors. The amount of betting done was tremendous, and the odds varied from day to day. Besides the local heroes, men came to compete from Switzerland, from St. Moritz, Davos and Caux, from far Sweden and further Canada. The excitement for days before the race was intense and grew hourly keener. Three courses had to be run, and the man whose total times formed the lowest aggregate was adjudged the winner. Max was a competitor, and so was Schneider, and so was I myself, but Miss Anchester for some reason or other refused to compete again. Stands were erected at various points of the run for spectators to view the proceedings from, cameras occupied every point of vantage, while a full cinematograph

apparatus was posted on the snowy crest of Jonathan. To give a detailed account of the proceedings would be to labour a triumph for myself. My three courses were accomplished in lower time than any one else's, and my last run, which I accomplished in 2 minutes 30½ seconds, was the next best time to Miss Anchester's record of the previous year. To say that the news of my victory did not afford me momentary pleasure would be untrue. Nevertheless, the mere reflection of how much greater the pleasure would have been under other circumstances turned my joy into something very like bitterness. Then, as I walked up the hill towards the Marienkastel, the cheering began, and for a time I was forced to forget myself. Louder and louder grew the applause as I dragged my winning craft behind me towards the store-room at the base of the crow's nest. There the popular enthusiasm reached a head, and I was borne shoulder high above the cheering throng back again towards the Brun-varad. For the moment the sensation of triumph conquered melancholy, and I wondered vaguely if the victory would be a permanent one.

In the Palace hall I met Schneider. He congratulated me warmly on my success.

"You go to the ball to-night, of course?" he said after I had thanked him for his effusive felicitations.

"Certainly, and you?"

"My place is by the King's side."

"I thought the firing incident and the substitution of Guides for Guards had quieted things down."

"That was a fortnight ago. Events move quickly in Weissheim."

"You suspect a fresh recrudescence of trouble?"

"I more than suspect it. I have been looking into the Queen's heart through the uninteresting medium of the Fräulein von Helder, and I see something very like murder in it."

I had lost much of my respect for the detective's intuition, but politeness restrained me from saying so.

"If there is anything I can do—" I began.

"There is nothing," he interrupted, "save, of course, to carry a weapon of defence."

The advice amused me, for I had never done such a thing in my life. Nevertheless as I was dressing for dinner my eyes rested on the leather-sheathed knife that the Princess had given me as a cotillon present on the night of Mrs. Van Troeber's ball. It was the nearest thing I possessed to a weapon of defence, and smiling at the dramatic nature of the proceeding I slipped it into the breast pocket of my evening coat.

CHAPTER XVII

AT ten o'clock on the evening of the sixth of February we left the Brun-varad for the scene of the Schattenberg's great annual ball

In the first sleigh rode Miss Anchester and myself, Herr Schneider and the commander-in-chief. Following us was the sleigh containing the Fräulein von Helder and two other Maids-of-Honour. Lastly came the State equipage containing the King and Queen, a magnificent vehicle drawn by six postilioned and gorgeously-trapped bays.

It was a typical Weissheim night, stilly cold, the true chiaroscuro of starlit, snow-lit darkness. The approach to the Marienkastel was illuminated by fairy lamps and Chinese lanterns, while the big classical gateway of the modern façade was flanked by groups of heavy bronze statuary bearing electric arc lights. Within, a multitude of powdered red-coated menials, a profusion of southern flowers, fragrance, warmth, brilliancy, and the indescribable, atmosphere of formal and exalted festivity.

The Grand Duke in the full dress of a Grimland General (a costume which suited him far better than ordinary evening clothes), his broad breast all stars and decorations, his swarthy face all smiles, welcomed us with a splendid assumption of cordiality,

Max, arrogantly handsome in his Guardsman's uniform, nonchalant, but a shade less bored than usual, condescended to offer us his white-gloved hand. The Princess Mathilde, in a marvellous ivory satin dress, a diamond coronet blazing in her dull black hair, seemed to be transformed from a romping girl to a stately queen. The transformation, as I shortly discovered, was purely superficial.

"You mustn't stare, Mr. Saunders," she said, "it's rude."

"I am a great admirer of young women and old lace," I replied. "When I behold such an unique combination of two excellences my eyes forget their good manners."

"But your tongue does not forget the arts of flattery. Well, I forgive you, because I rather like compliments, even obviously insincere ones, and if you're very good, you may dance numbers five and seventeen with me."

"The reward is certainly worth while being very good for," I said, writing my initials on her card, and noticing with a certain amount of complacency that they were the only two vacant spaces of her programme.

After booking a couple of waltzes with Miss Anchester, a polka with Fräulein von Helder, and a set of Lancers with Mrs. Van Troeber, not the least gorgeously arrayed member of that distinguished gathering, I took up a position at the side of the room, and leaning against a deeply-fluted pilaster, indulged in the passive delights of an amused and critical survey. A quadrille was in progress, a

stately simple dance, much affected in these parts, and one which, spite of its apparent simplicity, I had made no effort to become conversant with.

After my exhilarating experiences in the Grimland Derby, I was more than content to play the part of spectator. The ball-room itself, a huge, modern chamber brilliantly illuminated by enormous electroliers and innumerable wall brackets, and decorated with rococo plaster-work, was as ornate and quite as tasteless as the saloon of a big London hotel.

In spite of its size, the room was well filled, and the standard of good looks and feminine adornment sufficiently high to please all but the hopelessly hypercritical. Certainly it pleased me. The day had been one of triumph for me, a day in which I had tasted to the full the sweets of popular admiration. The cheers of the enthusiastic crowds as I was borne shoulder-high to the gates of the royal Palace were still ringing in my ears. The emptiness of fame was recognized but not felt. For the moment I was the most admired, the most envied man in Grimland, and my position afforded me the keenest satisfaction. I knew that there was scarcely a woman in the room, however beautiful of form, however overpoweringly numerous her quarterings, who would not be proud to dance with me to-night.

Vaguely I despised myself for the satisfaction the situation afforded me, but the satisfaction remained, unshaken and blatantly unassailable.

The band commenced to play the strains of the Eton boating song, and I remembered that I was engaged to dance that enchanting waltz with Miss

Anchester. The recollection afforded the necessary damper to my pride. The one woman in the room who set no value on my exploits was the one who alone was entitled to a share in my congratulations, Miss Anchester, my capable, practical, but unenthusiastic coach.

I found her standing by the King's side, and as I approached, I wondered if she were really the handsomest, the most aristocratic-looking and the best-dressed woman in the room, or whether I was merely suffering from the usual delusions of the ordinary love-sick idiot.

"The floor is very good and the band is excellent," I began, as we lapsed into the soft swing of the fascinating measure. "I believe these are the correct platitudes to utter in a ball-room."

Miss Anchester refused to smile.

"You don't alter much, do you?" she said thoughtfully.

"I hope not," I replied, "a change for the better is hardly conceivable."

"Not to a limited intelligence."

"You do not alter much either," I retorted.

"That is no doubt a pity."

"Not for the world at large," I replied. "Mustard is a popular condiment, though personally I never touch it."

"Do you know that you are rather rude?" she asked, in her usual tone, without banter and without annoyance.

"I am beginning to suspect it," I replied calmly. "The simile was a trifle piquant."

"Tell me," she said, changing the subject abruptly, "don't you think the Princess Mathilde looks perfectly lovely?"

"She is certainly very pretty," I conceded.

"Why qualify the appreciation?" demanded my partner. "The Princess is a remarkably beautiful girl, and a very nice one."

"I will not qualify your last statement," I said. "The Princess Mathilde is a charming girl."

"She is very much in love with life."

"The correct attitude to adopt towards that doubtful blessing," I remarked.

"Then why not adopt it?"

"Because one cannot force one's inclinations. Nature intended me to be morbid, like Herr Schneider. Look at him there, basking in the Princess's smile like a toad in the sunshine. He is not really happy. His lips smile, his eyes twinkle, his features express pleasurable attention, but at least half his mind is elsewhere, plotting for the King's safety, calculating his year's salary, analysing his own sensations, and wondering whether anything in this world is worth having or doing, saying or thinking or listening to."

"You hit him off perfectly," said my companion; "so well indeed, that I am forced to suspect a similar lack of concentration on your own part."

"In other words," I said, "you think I am not enjoying myself."

"I think it is quite possible."

At the risk of being rude I held my peace. The day had given me pleasure in perhaps its highest

form, namely a deeply coveted success at an exhilarating sport. The memory of the pleasure was with me still, tricked out and garnished with all the sensuous embellishments that music and beauty could afford ; but the one ingredient necessary to happiness was lacking. To put my thoughts into words was to make a barely veiled avowal, and the reasons for not doing so being overwhelming, I held my peace.

At the conclusion of the dance I made a formal suggestion anent refreshments. To my surprise my companion fell in with it.

"I should like a glass of champagne, please," she said. "After all, life's greatest joys are champagne and diamonds, and if I am denied one there is no reason why I should not enjoy the other."

I smiled. The insincerity of these abominable sentiments would have been palpable in a far more worldly creature than the royal Governess, and the unwonted flippancy of her utterance was quite out of keeping with the normal tone of her remarks.

"What are you smiling at ?" she asked, in all apparent seriousness.

"At your new-born profligacy."

"Thanks very much. First I am compared to mustard, then I am accused of profligacy. Your manners are, if possible, deteriorating."

"I hate good manners in a man," I retorted, as we approached the refreshment bar ; "they are like the perpetual wearing of patent leather boots. They denote the fool or the knave."

"When will you cease to moralise ?"

"As soon as you have finished your champagne."

"That will be never. My profligacy is a poor, half-fledged thing. I sip the cup of dissipation, but am not yet capable of emptying a full glass."

I looked at her curiously. Her manner had undergone a palpable change, and I who had desired nothing so much as an alteration in her behaviour, was vaguely displeased.

At this juncture, the King and General Meyer strolled into the buffet talking together in low tones. From the latter's mask-like features it was impossible as at all times, to learn anything, but from the King's heavy frown I gathered that their discussion was of a serious nature.

"Well, Saunders," said His Majesty, brightening visibly as his gaze fell upon us, and helping himself to a glass of champagne. "Here's to the Winner of the Grimland Derby. *Prosit!*"

"Here's to our strong-nerved English friend," said the General, raising his glass. "*Prosit.*"

"Here's to that dashing tobogganer, Mr. Saunders," said Miss Anchester, following suit. "*Prosit.*"

"Many thanks," I said, bowing. "My felicity is now complete. Is Your Majesty dancing?"

"I have been," said the King, "And what is more, Miss Anchester has promised to dance the next dance with me."

"The music is beginning," said the General, and a minute later he and I were alone in the buffet, save for the gorgeously arrayed attendants.

"What a fine couple they make," mused the

commander-in-chief. "I wish the King would divorce his present gracious and high-born spouse."

"And marry his gracious and comparatively humbly-born Governess?"

General Meyer nodded. "I could feel loyal to a Queen like that," he said.

"She must indeed be fascinating."

My companion smiled.

"You think my loyalty needs a little rousing," he said.

"It is hardly of the fervid type," I replied, "but doubtless serviceable enough as far as the King is concerned."

"If I were a novelist," he went on, "I should engage the King to Miss Anchester, and you to the Princess Mathilde."

"And yourself to Mrs. Van Troeber."

"No," he replied. "That is a matter for fact rather than fiction. Congratulate me. The divine widow has made me the happiest General in Grimland."

"That is saying little."

"The happiest Jew in Europe, then."

"That is saying a great deal, but I hope not too much. I congratulate you with all my heart and drink to your felicity. The alliance will be an ideal one of brains and beauty."

"Many thanks. By the way, will you stay till the end of the dance?"

"As likely as not," I replied. "I do not like dances as a rule, but am enjoying this in a placid sort of way. It is something of a spectacle."

"It is certainly something of a spectacle to see the Grand Duke so uniformly amiable. Still more so to see young Max disporting himself with the abandon of a healthy-minded schoolboy."

"It smacks of the unnatural," I said.

The General shrugged his shoulders. "It has made Schneider very uneasy," he said. "That man is a marvel. He reads the hearts and minds of men like an open book."

"Expurgating the noblest chapters," I commented.

"Perhaps, but he is very wonderful. If I were the novelist again, I would marry him to the Fräulein von Helder. It would be poetic justice." And with another shrug of his high shoulders and a Semitic smirk he left me.

Slowly the evening wore on with its endless round of waltzes, polkas, cotillon and quadrille. Part performer, part spectator, I passed my time now dancing with the Princess Mathilde, who was in her very best spirits and trod the floor like a fairy, now with the Fräulein von Helder, who was also in her very best spirits and trod the floor like an elephant. Again, in periods of pleasurable inactivity, I watched the Grand Duke as he threw himself with the robust vigour of his middle age and a certain native dignity into the rousing measure of the Polish Mazurka. I noted Herr Schneider, here, there and everywhere, always smiling, always gesticulating, unctuously polite, a perfect dancer, a marvellously glib talker, yet nowhere welcome.

Soon after one o'clock their Majesties departed, and an hour later the crowd had thinned visibly.

I looked at my programme. I had only one more dance booked, number seventeen, and I had promised most faithfully to dance that with the Princess Mathilde.

The Brun-varad party had all left, but yawningly allegiant, I stayed behind. My reward was long in coming for extras were inserted, and I had regretted my promise not a little before the familiar strains of *La lettre de Manon* proclaimed the end of my gaping tryst.

"What a shame to keep you up all this time," said the Princess, mockingly, as we met by the flower-wreathed pillars of the music gallery. "I've noticed you supporting the wall nobly for a long time. Poor little thing, is it pining for its bed after its noble exertions?"

"I am pining to dance my favourite waltz with you," I said, politely. "My gaping is a symptom of excitement, not fatigue."

"Come along then," she said merrily, "let us enjoy ourselves while we are young. How lovely Miss Anchester looked to-night."

"Almost divine!" I asserted.

"Don't be horrid," said the Princess, laughing. "She is very beautiful."

"In disposition no less than feature," I assented. "Her perfection is angelic, and being a mere man, my admiration for an angel is naturally somewhat distant."

"You should whisper sweet nothings in her ear."

"Thank you," I said. "My ordinary conversa-

tion is quite foolish enough to bring down her rebuke. I tremble to contemplate her scorn for a sentimental conversation."

"I shouldn't think you were much good at sentiment," laughed my partner.

"I am a perfect fool at it," I admitted. "But I am very efficient at supper. Have you supped yet?"

"Once."

"And I once also. I have expelled Nature with a knife and fork—*tamen usque recurret*. In other words, I have developed my second appetite as a runner develops his second wind."

We made our way to the supper room, which was almost empty, and made a praiseworthy attack on some mayonnaise of chicken and a bottle of '89 Pommery and Greno.

There were several more dances on the programme, but the Princess showed no desire to curtail our tête-à-tête.

"I *have* enjoyed myself this evening," she said, fervently.

"Don't speak of enjoyment in the past," I said. "Surely the present is enjoyable enough. I always think the light refreshment at the conclusion of a dance is the acme of pleasure. At least, there is only one higher rung on the ladder of enjoyment."

"And that is?"

"The cigar after the light refreshment."

"Then you can climb to the highest rung of your sensuous ladder."

"Not here?"

"No : but I can take you to a place where you can smoke."

"By myself ? "

"No, in my society—if you can tolerate it."

I smiled. I had always imagined princesses to be somewhat rigorously protected beings, hedged in and fenced by every restraint that the ingenuity of etiquette and court convention could devise. Yet this undeniably charming creature in the first flush of her inexperienced womanhood was not only free from such watchful supervision, but was unhampered in herself by any artificially cultivated sense of restraint. If ever a girl was natural, wholesomely-minded and altogether loveable, it was the bright-eyed, bright-souled little Princess who shared my supper table.

"The suggestion is worthy of you," I said, slowly.

"That is to say, it is admirable."

"Then you will come and smoke in my boudoir ? "

There was an ill-concealed eagerness in her tone, and her eyes seemed to wait expectantly for my acquiescence.

Some chance words of General Meyer recalled themselves to my puzzled brain. "The wildest blood in Europe runs in that little witch's veins," he had once said. Well, maybe, but it was impossible to con the schoolgirl merriment on her pretty face and doubt its quintessential innocence.

"The proposal is an alluring one," I said slowly.

"The question is, does your father approve of your taking your partners to smoke in your boudoir ? "

"You are afraid of my father being angry with you?"

"Not in the least. I am afraid of his being angry with you."

"Well, then," she laughed, "that's all right, because if you aren't afraid of my father, I'm not in the very least. Besides," she went on, seeing me still hesitate, "he doesn't mind that sort of thing in the least. Why should he?"

"Why indeed?" I echoed.

"I shall be horribly offended if you don't come."

"So you said once when you invited me to 'bobsleigh'."

"Oh!" she laughed, "then I had a motive."

"Well," I said, rising, "I suppose I must fall in with your unconventional schemes."

"Conventionality has little part in the character of the Schattenbergs," she said, as we left the room.

Instead of returning to the ball-room, we passed down a side passage to the left. Another turn to the right, a couple of flights of stairs, and we passed through a swing doorway to an unlit corridor overlooking a snow-carpeted courtyard.

"Now we are in the ancient part of the Marienkastel," remarked my fair guide, gazing out of the window; "it was from that corner tourelle that the Dukes of Schattenberg hung their prisoners of war in the olden days."

"A curious family yours," I commented.

"Our family history is the most romantic in Europe," she said simply, halting before a low door

opening on our right. "It is a thousand pities we live in such a prosaic age."

"A slightly bloodthirsty regret," I remarked, thinking of the prisoners, and following her into a pitch-dark room where I waited for the light to be turned on.

I heard the click of an electric light switch, and after the half-second necessary for the adaptation of my vision I found I was gazing into the polished barrel of a revolver.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was Max who was holding the lethal weapon that threatened my inoffending head: Max, in the green and gold tunic of his Guardsman's uniform and his white kid dancing gloves. Behind him was the Grand Duke, no longer smilingly affable and courteously gay, but scowling, menacing, a grim silent figure dramatically suggestive of pent up violence, with danger written in his fierce black eyes and the deep ploughed lines of his swarthy brow. At his side stood the Princess Mathilde gazing fixedly at me with a look that was half excitement and half shame-faced merriment.

"If you move I shall fire," said Max grimly.

"In that case," I replied, "I shall endeavour to keep perfectly still."

"Good; we don't want to hurt you, but for purposes of our own it is necessary to tie you up. Kindly get into that arm-chair."

I recalled Schneider's advice to me to arm myself, and remembered the knife in my breast pocket, but fortunately refrained from making any involuntary movement in that direction.

"It is no use meeting *force majeure* by *force inférieure*," I said, philosophically, complying almost instantly with his request.

"Not a bit. You submitted to *force majeure* that day we tried to stop you going to Heldersburg, but you got there all the same. You're a crafty beggar, Saunders, but we don't mean letting you outwit us this time."

I submitted to the indignity of being bound hand and foot to the armchair in which I had perforce seated myself. The process was accomplished with a thin tough cord and the united efforts of the Grand Duke and his arrogant offspring, and as far as I was a judge of such matters, the tying up seemed to be done on thoroughly practical and scientific lines.

"Might I enquire the reason for this interference with the liberty of the subject?" I asked.

"Yes," said Max, pulling vigorously at a final knot. "We're making a descent on the Brun-varad. This precious regiment of Guides that the King and Meyer thought so loyal, are loyal only to the longest purse. The sentinels on guard to-night are our sworn allies; the barracks at Weissheim are full of loyal soldiers waiting to shout, "long live Fritz the First, King of Grimland! Long live the Schattenbergs! Once we have obtained possession of the royal Person the revolution is accomplished. The country hungers for a change of dynasty as a prisoner hungers for a change of diet. On all sides the situation will be received with enthusiasm."

Something of the romance of the occasion had stirred the young Prince's sluggish blood and lent a fire to his dull eye, a colour to his pale cheek. For once he had found work congenial to his blasé

mind, something so wild and dangerous that he had half thrown off the air of well-bred boredom that had seemed a part and parcel of his nature. On the other hand, the Grand Duke was singularly calm at the congenial prospect of violence and personal danger. He never uttered a word, his frown never relaxed, only his fine white teeth moved ceaselessly with a slight grinding motion as if his fierce spirit chafed and fretted to commence his reckless enterprise. His thoughts were obviously rather on the big deed that was to come than on the trivial detail which preceded it.

"And you do me the honour," I said, "of fancying my presence at the Brun-varad might upset your carefully planned *coup de main*."

"You're on the wrong side, Saunders," said Max, "and we fancy, rightly or wrongly, that you are a more dangerous opponent than either the foxy old Jew or the flat-faced detective."

"I am highly flattered," I replied, not without truth, "but is it not rather rash to tell me all your plans before putting them into execution?"

"Of course, if you think that," said Max grimly producing his revolver again.

"On second thoughts," I said, laughing, "I perceive that the imprudence is apparent rather than real. By no means can a trussed fowl avert a revolution."

Max laughed his rare laugh.

"You're not a bad sort, Saunders," he said; "and we don't wish you any harm. You're better off here than dodging bullets in the Brun-varad."

"Come," said the Grand Duke breaking his silence for the first time, "we must return to the ballroom and be there till the last guest leaves. We ought to be able to make a start at half-past three."

"I hope so," said Max, and with a cheerfully insulting nod to me he followed his parent from the room.

The moment the door was shut behind them the Princess clapped her hands together and eyed me with mocking laughing eyes.

"And you're not ashamed of yourself?" I said quietly.

"A little. But it's all so droll."

"Your sense of humour is peculiar," I retorted. "There are plenty of things to laugh at in the world besides violence and treachery."

"Now you're getting sulky."

"Does it not occur to you," I asked, "that my good nature may not be inexhaustible? You lure me up here under false pretences, and I am bound hand and foot while a vile plot is being carried out against a noble gentleman and a friend. It is humorous no doubt—all breaches of hospitality are."

"You're very, very sulky indeed. In the first place the King may be a friend of yours, but he's not a noble gentleman at all, but a scoundrel and a traitor in the pay of Austria. Father and Max are just going to put him quietly out of the way so that he can't do any more harm to the country."

"In plain language, murder him." I interposed.

The Princess's eyes flashed indignantly.

"Certainly not," she cried. "There is to be no bloodshed in the proceedings. Do you suppose I should have lent my help to the plot if there had been a possibility of bloodshed in it?"

"I think you are capable of anything," I said deliberately.

She looked me full in the face.

"You nasty, evil-tempered man," she said with slow emphasis. "You're as cross as you can be, and absolutely horrid. I warned you when we first met that my invitations must be regarded with suspicion unless they were particularly specified as guileless, and now that you've blundered into a trap, instead of taking your defeat good-humouredly, you're as disagreeable and evil-tempered as possible. Ugh! I've a good mind not to give you anything to smoke."

For the life of me I could not help laughing. This light-hearted little noblewoman played at high treason with less seriousness than most men played golf, certainly with less seriousness than the Scotsmen displayed on the Pariserhof curling rinks.

For the moment I forgot that the King was in danger, that the fate of a nation was trembling in the balance, that the thin cord which bound me was biting painfully into my flesh, or rather I half forgot these things and laughed, laughed recklessly at the reckless irresponsibility of my charming captor.

She brightened visibly again at my unnatural merriment.

"That's better," she said; "I knew you'd see the comic side of it directly. I'm awfully sorry to have been so mean, but I had to take my share in the plot, and after all you're much safer here than in the Brun-varad. Now that you're good again I'll give you a cigarette."

And getting a box from the mantelpiece she placed a cigarette between my lips and then striking a match held it for me to get a light by.

"And I suppose," I said, as I puffed at the peace-offering, "I suppose I'm to be kept here till the revolution's accomplished."

"You are to be kept here till four o'clock, and then I shall release you."

"And if I try and escape?"

"Then I shall shoot you," and she laughingly produced a small revolver from a drawer and laid it on the table at her side.

"Is it loaded?" I demanded.

She nodded her head.

"Honour bright, and I'm a very good shot too, so be careful."

"You really would shoot me?" I persisted.

"Certainly, if necessary."

I looked at her smiling face and wondered if she was capable of carrying out her threat. I doubted it, but on the other hand should have been extremely sorry to run the risk.

"I fancy I can loosen these cords a bit," I said hypocritically. "I think I shall have a dash for it and chance your missing me."

A look of anxiety crept into her eyes, but

she laughed again with a fine assumption of incredulity.

"You can never undo those knots of Max's," she said, "but if you do I shall certainly shoot you—as a friend, through the leg."

"You bloodthirsty little wretch!" I cried. "Do you know that revolver bullets hurt?"

"That's what they're meant for."

I regarded her in silence for a moment, smiling in my own despite.

"By Gad," I said at length, "I believe you'd do it."

She nodded cheerfully.

"You're only just beginning to take me seriously," she said. "I'm a very strenuous conspirator, and I can't allow my father's schemes and the country's welfare to suffer from any misguided leniency towards a foolish young foreigner."

"Patriotism thy name is Mathilde Schattenberg. Argument is invariably wasted upon a woman, upon a patriotic woman it is worse than useless. I accept the situation. Will you kindly take the cigarette end out of my mouth?"

"With pleasure. May I give you another?"

"Thanks, no," I replied. "A cigarette is a poor form of smoke when one is denied the use of one's hands. The smoke gets into one's eyes so."

"I can get you a cigar if you will."

"I should be very grateful."

"There is a box in Max's room, I know. I will go and get you one; I shan't be long."

The moment the Princess shut the door behind



" I regarded her in silence for a moment,"

her I made desperate struggles to free myself. My efforts were absolutely fruitless and not unattended with pain. I desisted with an oath. I was angry, though less angry than might have been expected, for the extraordinary flippancy of my captor had infected me to a certain extent with a sense of unreality. And yet, however ludicrous might be the play of Weissheim politics, it was patent enough that the King's life was in high jeopardy. I knew enough about revolutions and the disposition of the male Schattenbergs to have little faith in the "seizing of the Royal Person" theory put forward by Max and believed in so implicitly by his confiding sister. If, as was highly probable, the Grand Duke and his satellites effected an entrance into the Brun-varad, it was morally certain that King Karl's existence as a sovereign and a man would terminate in bloody simultaneity. And I, who for some reason or other had formed a keen affection for the twenty-second Karl, who had in my humble way been able on more than one occasion to serve his interests, fretted and raged at my close-pent captivity, and cursed the folly that had involved me in such galling impotence.

Slowly the door of my chamber opened again and I hastily resolved to make one final, albeit hopeless, appeal to the Grand Duke's all too dutiful daughter, to plead the King's cause with her, to endeavour to demonstrate her father's selfishness, and the truest method of serving her country's interest.

To my utter astonishment it was no beautiful

and splendidly attired Princess that met my expectant gaze, no black-haired laughing-eyed little woman in a Parisian ball dress and a gleaming coronet; but a small boy, a fair-haired lad of eight or nine in a tiny suit of blue silk pyjamas, a look of puzzled wonder in his sleepy eyes.

"Little Stephan!" I cried. "Why, what on earth are you doing here?"

He smiled as he recognised me.

"I couldn't sleep," he said, "'cos of the band playing. I thought I heard Mathilde's voice, so I came in here."

"Your bedroom is near here?"

"Yes, next door. Why! you're tied up!"

This obvious fact had only just dawned on his half-dozing senses.

"Why's that?" he pursued. "Have you been naughty?"

I could hardly explain the truth to him—it was too humiliating for one thing.

"It's a game," I replied mendaciously.

"A game?"

"Yes," I said. "Your sister ties me up in the chair and goes away for five minutes, and if I can free myself before she comes back she has to give me a box of chocolates. If on the other hand she finds me still bound on her return I have to give her the sweets."

Stephan brightened visibly. Here was something he could understand.

"And can you untie yourself?" he asked with manifest interest.

"I fear not."

"Can I help you?"

"Can you help me!" I repeated. "It's a most brilliant idea," and I wondered with a sudden gleam of hope whether his tiny fingers could undo the fiercely tied knots of his elder brother's tying.

With hope came the burning dread of the Princess's return.

"Be quick and try," I said eagerly.

"Will you give me some of the chocolates if I do," he asked with the cunning smile of the juvenile bargainer.

"Yes, lots—pounds. Only be quick or your sister will be back."

The small fingers worked vigorously at the entangled cord, but it needed greater strength than little Stephan's to relax those close-pulled knots.

"I can't do it," he said smiling, as if failure was almost as good a joke as success.

I began to despair.

"Can you get at my breast pocket?" I asked as a fresh idea struck me. "Quick, quick!"

After a brief rummaging he managed to extract the knife I had slipped into my dress-coat just before starting for the ball.

"A knife," he said.

"Yes, take the sheath off. Now cut the cord, quickly. Anywhere, yes, that will do. Mind my wrist. Well done, Stephan! You're a hero! You shall have the largest box of chocolates in Weissheim to-morrow!"

"Promise!"

"I swear it," I said. "Now go to bed before Mathilde comes back again, because she'll be very angry when she finds I'm loose, and if she discovers that you've helped me, why—" but little Stephan had run chuckling from the room.

My first act of freedom was to secure the revolver which the Princess had promised to use in the event of my attempting to escape. It was a small delicately made weapon, loaded as she had said, and I was about to put it in my pocket, when a fresh idea struck me. Opening the drawer from which the Princess had taken it, I found another revolver therein, a big serviceable weapon of the ordinary army type, ready loaded in every chamber. This I transferred hastily to my breast pocket, and extracting the cartridges from the smaller weapon, replaced it on the table.

I looked at my watch: it was three o'clock. The Schattenbergs would not start for another half hour and could I but leave the house in safety I might yet frustrate their treasonable quest.

I was just contemplating a dash for liberty when I heard the air of *La lettre de Manon* being whistled in the passage. The Princess was coming back.

Without any very definite scheme of action, but anxious lest the Princess should give the alarm that I was free, I darted back to my chair and throwing the severed cord loosely round me, assumed my previous attitude of tightly-pent rigidity. Hardly had I done so when the Princess entered.

"I can't find Max's cigars," she began, "and

I've looked everywhere. I'm so sorry. Won't you have another cigarette?"

"I don't think I'll smoke any more, thank you."

"You've only got another hour to wait. I hope the cord does not hurt you."

"Not in the least, thank you."

"Of course," she went on, "it's an awful shame treating you like this, but duty is duty—and it'll be an experience for you."

I laughed—undoubtedly it would be an experience for me.

"I'm so glad you treat it as a joke," she went on, "I hoped you would."

"What time do the conspirators start?" I asked.

"They've just gone," she said. "The guests left earlier than they expected, and father and Max started five minutes ago."

"Gone!" I cried. "Then I must free myself!"

"Don't be foolish. You can never break that cord—you'll only strain yourself."

"Nonsense," I said. "I am a second Sampson—there," and with a well-feigned simulation of a supreme effort I cast the loosely encircling cord from me to the floor.

In a second the Princess had covered me with her empty revolver. Her eye was bright and unflinching, her hand steady as a rock.

"Be careful, Mr. Saunders," she said firmly.

"Bah," I laughed. "You would not really shoot me."

"Upon my honour, I'm serious. If you make the slightest effort to escape, I shall fire."

"Nonsense," I said; "you are not so blood-thirsty as you pretend. The King is in danger, and my place is at his side. Duty is duty; you said so yourself just now."

"Mr. Saunders," she cried, and there was acute distress in her voice, "I implore you not to try and escape. If I have never been serious in my life I am serious now. I swear it on my soul. It is useless your trying to get away, for if I let you go, you could never reach the Brun-varad before my father and brother."

"I can try."

"It is impossible I tell you. They have gone in a sleigh, and there is not another vehicle to be obtained for love or money. Do not force me to extremities for nothing."

I looked her full in the face smiling brutally at her evident concern.

"Nevertheless I am going," I said calmly, and walked still facing her to the door.

The muzzle of her revolver followed me as I moved pointing with relentless accuracy right between my eyes. Then it was lowered to the level of my knee.

"Stop," she cried imperatively.

"I shall not."

I waited expectantly for the impotent click of her harmless weapon. I was mistaken.

Hurling the revolver into a corner of the room she flung herself into a chair beside the table and

buried her face in her arms, sobbing and weeping in a paroxysm of tears.

Instantly I felt a brute. She had, as she believed, spared me, and I, who had thought to have had the laugh of her, was smitten by a bitter pang of self-reproach. She was a Schattenberg, and I had thought the wild blood of her race, her keen mistaken patriotism, her affectionate loyalty to her truculent father and reckless brother were more than sufficient to overcome a woman's natural reluctance to wound a fellow-creature. But I had under-estimated the power of her womanliness, and where I had looked for farce found something very much akin to tragedy—a woman's murdered self-respect.

More moved than I should have believed possible, I did a very presumptuous and foolish thing. Stepping softly to her side I bent over her bowed head and slightly touched the crown of her dead-black locks with my lips, as a brother might implant a kiss on the hair of a grieving sister. Then I left her. Closing the door behind me I swiftly retraversed the dark corridor, passed through the swing door, descended the stairs and ultimately found myself in the hall. The great door was shut, but there were plenty of men about clearing up and putting things straight after the gorgeous entertainment of the evening, and I had no difficulty, after finding my hat, coat and snowboots, in obtaining an egress.

Outside the stars were shining in the cloudless heavens, and a half moon had turned the snow of

the Klauigberg to polished silver. The great courtyard was impressively silent and absolutely devoid of vehicles, and the lamps of the bronze statuary no longer illuminated it. I wrapped my coat closely round me for the cold was intense. Was it possible to reach the Brun-varad before the Grand Duke's sleigh? That was the question I asked myself as I stood surveying the magic spectacle of the winter night. I would try, of course, but had I the slightest chance of success? The sleigh had a good start of me, and I could hardly travel over the snow-encumbered roads as rapidly as a horse-drawn vehicle. I looked round in something like despair, and I noticed on my left that something blotted out a long rectangle of the starry heavens. It was the wooden crow's nest, the look-out tower of the Kastel run, and the realisation sent a spasm of hope thrilling through me.

If I could find a toboggan I could yet reach the Brun-varad by the Kastel run and be there before the Grand Duke's sleigh. In an instant I was at the base of the watch tower, and a minute later had burst in the flimsy door of the toboggan store-room. There was an abundance of machines to choose from, and I hastily selected a "skeleton" like my own, with a sliding seat. I dragged it breathlessly out and set it at the head of the track, and as I did so, the chilling thought struck me that I had no rakes. I paused. I had once asked the Governess, who knew as much about the Kastel run as any living being, if any one had ever made the descent of that dangerous course without

rakes, and her answer had been a scornful denial. Then, because I felt fear stealing into my soul, and I knew that delay meant utter annihilation of my courage, I hardened my heart and cast myself on to the borrowed sledge. As I did so I heard the contact wire snap, and I realised that the timing apparatus had been set for the ladies' race on the following day. I was off, and at first I did not feel the need of my rakes, for one usually devoted the first few hundred yards of the course to developing speed as rapidly as possible, reserving the use of the iron toe-spikes for the big corners. Nevertheless I kept the toes of my snow-boots well pressed down on the track, anxious above all things to offer every obstacle to a too tremendous and uncontrollable rapidity. Moreover, I did not ride well forward as in racing, but worked the sliding seat back as far as possible, and travelling thus I progressed at first at considerably less than my usual speed. I was in a hurry, Heaven knows, but if ever there was a case of more haste less speed it was on that moonlit rakeless ride down the Kastel toboggan run.

Gradually in spite of my precautions the speed increased, and as my iron runners skimmed down the frictionless path and the icy night air beat on my forehead I felt a tightening about my heart, that was half fear, half an awful exhilaration.

Swifter and swifter grew the speed, louder and louder shrieked the wind in my deafened ears. The marvellous beauty of the night was felt rather than seen, but as I went up the bank of the first

corner I caught a momentary glimpse of the moonlit snows of the Nonnensee and wondered, almost without fear, whether I was not soon destined to make their close acquaintance. I thought of Herr Schneider's almost blasphemously expressed desire for a death-leap over Jonathan, with its swooning fall, merging, after an infinity of unending seconds, into the annihilation that knows no waking. I had attributed his utterance to the morbid excitement of an unstable brain, and yet, as I sped at that fearful velocity under the starlit heavens, I looked death in the face rather as a sporting opponent in a game than a dread enemy without chivalry and without compassion. I would do all in my power to steer my humming craft to a safe conclusion, but if, as seemed probable, I failed, well, I asked no better termination to my career than that endless plunge over the white precipice that walled the Nonnensee. The first few bends I negotiated with the ease of a skilled tobogganner; down the straight I tore, and then in a twinkling David gleamed blue-green before me in the moonlight. Fiercely I pressed down the unarmoured, ineffectual toes of my snow-boots onto the glassy track, fiercely I pushed back the moveable seat of my toboggan to the utmost capacity of its slide, and setting my teeth, dashed at the all familiar rampart. I took it early in the bend, as was right, but my unchecked speed took me far too high, far higher than I had ever been before, and I felt that my prospects of safely rounding David were scanty in the extreme. In a flash I was off Jonathan

and the crucial point of the descent was upon me. I forced myself back on my machine to the uttermost possible inch, and stuck out my legs to the left as far as I could possibly stretch them. Higher and higher I rose on that steep curving wall, half way up, three quarters, higher, higher, till my outside runner was within a foot of the clear cut summit, and I lugged at the head of my toboggan with every ounce of energy that my muscles could command. Higher still I rose, despite my frantic efforts, till an inch of gleaming ice alone stood between me and destruction. With fascinated eyes I watched the narrow band between my uppermost runner and the sky, and so thin was that saving rim of ice that the moonlight shone through it as clearly as through a pane of glass. For a fraction of a second it seemed to narrow, and then, merciful heavens! it grew rapidly wider and wider again, and I knew, with a singing heart, that the almost impossible had been achieved, that the Kastel run had been negotiated by a rakeless rider!

"Thank God!" I breathed, for I realised that though there was plenty of the run yet to be traversed, the remaining part furnished a succession of straights and easy curves quite without terrors for the scientific tobogganer.

Suddenly in the midst of my self-congratulations a sound broke through the roaring in my ears which had more alarm for me than the prospect of flying over the summit of Jonathan. I heard the tinkling of a sleigh bell, and a second later I saw the lights of a pair-horse sleigh advancing rapidly

through the pine woods in the direction of Weissheim. If there is one thing paralysing to the brain of a tobogganer it is the prospect of something crossing his track, and in spite of the great precautions habitually employed when the Kastel run was open, I never passed that crossing of the Reifinsdorf road without a slight stab of anxiety lest some over-hasty driver should disregard the danger signal and block my lightning course. And now there was no danger signal hoisted, nor, had there been, was the Grand Duke the man to regard it, under the present circumstances, for an instant. Even had I been wearing rakes, I could no more have stopped my flight than one can recall a shell from a fired cannon, but as it was, I was powerless even to check my speed in the faintest degree. The rounding of David had been dangerous, but there some slight scope had been offered to my skill, my nerve, my physical strength. Here I was in the hands of fate, powerless to affect the issue, incapable even of guessing whether I should pass in front of or behind the sleigh, or whether—I know the anxiety of those few seconds almost turned my brain.

Fiercely the coachman whipped his galloping horses, and my strained eyes saw the muffled forms of the two Schattenbergs and two red points of light which told me they were smoking. Then I shut my eyes, for it seemed that I must dash right into them, and in that moment of supreme agony I prayed that my death might not be altogether useless, that the collision might so shatter and disable the conspirators that the night's treason

might be utterly confounded and brought to naught.

When I opened my eyes again I knew that I had missed the sleigh, that it had crossed the track a fraction of a second before me, that the tail end of its iron-shod runners had passed within a foot of my devoted head. Half dazed, I swung round the next bend—the Dog's leg as they call it—and a moment later I had passed the winning post and was dashing up the steep incline which terminates the run. Mechanically I pressed down my toes on to the track again to check my course, but the speed with which my toboggan leapt up the hill told me the futility of doing so. In the ordinary way the sharp rise in the course and a vigorous application of one's rakes just sufficed to bring one's craft to a standstill at the summit of Buffer Hill, but I realized, with a fresh accession of alarm, that the process of descending the Kastel run without rakes had yet to reach its safe accomplishment.

Up the sharp straight hill I bounded, over the low snow bank at the end I dashed, flying into space as a stone that is hurled over a precipice.

What would be my fate I had not the faintest idea, for the possibility of over-shooting Buffer Hill had never before entered into my calculations.

For an eternity I seemed skimming through endless realms of icy air, then there came a sudden ploughing through deep snow—and then cessation. Breathless; shaken, dazed, I lay motionless, but clinging still to my faithful toboggan. I had not the faintest idea whether I was fatally, seriously, or only slightly injured, though I feared the worst.

Slowly I dragged myself to my feet and looked around me. I was in a wide field of deep snow, and there, full sixty paces from me, was the miniature eminence of Buffer Hill. I knew exactly where I was: I was in the Palace garden, and to gain an entrance to the Brun-varad had to wade through many yards of exceedingly deep snow. My efforts, though of necessity slow, reassured me completely on the subject of my own unimpaired vitality. My breath was short, but my limbs were uninjured, and, determined at all costs to anticipate the conspiring Grand Duke, I struggled manfully to the firm road leading to the Brun-varad. Once on hard rolled snow, I ran as swiftly as my shortened breath would permit as far as the great entrance in the Waffen-Thurm.

There were sentinels in the charcoal-warmed sentry boxes, and as I approached they looked at each other an instant, and then there was an ominous click, and they stepped out to bar my way.

"Good-evening," I said affably. "His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Fritz bade me tell you that he would be here in five minutes. I am going into the Palace, but you must on no account let anyone else enter before his Highness's arrival."

That the men were hand in glove with the enemy was patent, but my assured manner carried the day as I expected, and with a "God be with your Excellency," they stepped back into the friendly warmth of their shelters.

The great doorway yielded to my pressure, and

taking one final glance round before entering, I listened. The faint sound of sleigh bells tinkled in my ears. In five minutes the Grand Duke *would* be here.

CHAPTER XIX

MY first impulse on entering the Palace was to bolt the door. As I was about to do so my eyes fell on a sleepy, corpulent figure, rising perfunctorily at my entrance from the depths of a comfortable armchair. It was the major-domo, Bömcke, whose duty it doubtless was to see that the last guest was home before securing the Palace for the night.

He gaped audibly, and was about to shoot the great bolts with which the Siegersthor was furnished, when I addressed him.

“Herr Bömcke.”

“Yes, Mr. Saunders.”

“Where is his Majesty ? ”

“His Majesty has retired.”

“And who is the officer on guard.”

“Captain von Odenheimer. He is going his rounds.”

“Herr Bömcke,” I said severely, “are you a loyal servant of the King ? ”

The major-domo’s sleepy countenance displayed considerable mystification at my question, but for answer he drew himself up to a posture of superb dignity, and placed his fat right hand on his dress-waistcoat.

"Because," I pursued, "I have reason to believe that an attempt will be made to-night on the King's person. The Grand Duke may be here at any moment."

"The Grand Duke!"

I never saw a man so robbed of his attributes as was the major-domo in that revealing moment of dismayed astonishment. His dignity, his pomposity, his presence were gone in a twinkling, and there was surprisingly little left—merely a quivering, spineless, barely articulate jelly of a man. Nevertheless his collapse proved that he, at any rate, was not a party to the treachery, and I hesitated no longer in giving him my orders.

"Bolt the door thoroughly, Herr Bömcke," I said, "and then go and warn Captain von Odenheimer of the impending attack. He is a capable man and will do everything in his power to make the place secure."

Then without further delay I mounted the stairs in the direction of the King's bedchamber.

The Schattenberg's motives in kidnapping me were doubly clear now. Not only did they wish to remove a possibly dangerous adversary from the scene of their activities, but they knew that until I had returned to the Palace the gate would be left unbarred, or at any rate that some one would readily open it to an expected summons. Outside the King's door I halted a moment in some trepidation. Then I knocked, softly—there was no answer. Again I knocked—more vigorously this time, and almost immediately the door was flung open, and

for the second time that night I found myself looking straight down the barrel of a revolver.

It was the King who had opened the door, and his thick stiff hair was matted with the disorder consequent on slumber. Over his sleeping-suit he had donned a flowery dressing-gown, and his appearance was sufficiently comic to bring a smile to my face. Nevertheless there was no answering smile on the King's countenance as he recognised me, neither did he pay me the compliment of lowering his revolver.

"What do you want?" he asked brusquely.

"It is I, Saunders."

"I know. What do you want?"

"If your Majesty will kindly lower your revolver I will explain."

He looked at me doubtfully for a moment and then did as I had bid.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I am very sleepy."

In as few words as possible I explained the situation to him and the fact that the conspirators might be there at any moment.

"And you escaped from their net, and tobogged here in order to warn me?" he said.

"Without rakes," I added, with more than a touch of pride.

The King tossed back his head with a gesture which meant much. He was wide enough awake now, and though his outward composure was remarkable, I read the light of battle in his brightening eyes.

"Let me think," he said, passing his hand through

his matted locks. "You told Bömcke to fasten the door. Good! Let us take up our position at a window overlooking the Siegers-thor, and fire on them as they arrive."

The plan was simple and might perhaps have been effective had circumstances permitted the carrying of it out. As a matter of fact the King's scheme was barely formulated when the sound of voices reached our ears from below. The King seized me by the wrist and dragged me to the head of the staircase. Next he switched off a light which shone above our heads, and together we cautiously descended a half flight of stairs till the hall came within range of our vision. Then we waited gazing silently at the strange scene which met our eyes. The hall contained a group of some half-dozen officers in full uniform, and in the centre was the Grand Duke and his son Max. The former was addressing the throng in deep low tones, emphasising his remarks with grandiose flourishings of a drawn sword. Of his speech we could catch but occasional phrases, but it was evidently a species of patriotic incitement to murder, with a high-spirited eulogy of his own House and person. I wondered how they had obtained entrance, and concluded that the redoubtable Herr Bömcke had been too paralysed by my alarming information to perform his all-important duty of bolting the Siegersthor. This view was borne out by a glimpse of the major-domo's prostrate body, propped limply against a marble pedestal in a corner of the apartment, a streak of crimson staining his otherwise colourless face.

After a few moments the Grand Duke's oration came to an end, and a murmur of approval or allegiance came from the surrounding officers. It was clear that, having obtained a foot-hold in the Palace, secrecy and silence were no longer essential to their scheme.

"They wish to lure me down there and pot me," whispered the King in my ear. "*Pas si bête!* I am going to have one shot at dear Fritz, and then I shall bolt for the Schweigenkammer. I want you to rouse Meyer and tell him to get some loyal troops from Weissheim."

"What about Odenheimer and his quarter-company?" I asked.

"If Odenheimer and his quarter-company were true to their salt they would be down there wiping my cousin's blood off their bayonets. No, there are few men in the world I can trust, and Meyer is one of them. When I fire, run to his bedroom."

I watched my royal companion take his deliberate aim and then, as his steady finger pressed back the trigger and the clear report rang through the building, I turned and dashed up the stairs in search of the commander-in-chief. A muttered "*Höllensglück*" from his Majesty, who followed close on my heels, told me that the shot had missed. I glanced hastily backwards and perceived that the pack had recovered from their surprise and were pursuing us with murderous intent. On I dashed, and as I gained the landing which led to General Meyer's room I heard the King stumble over his long dressing-gown and sprawl full length along

the stairs. In a second I was by his side again and had whipped out the revolver I had taken from the Marien-kastel. Our opponents were still a full flight below us, but in that momentary halt I was recognised.

“Saunders!” I heard Max cry with a shout of anger and astonishment, and a second later a revolver bullet ripped up the pine panelling at the level of my head.

“Upwards,” cried the King, who had recovered himself with surprising quickness, and we continued our rapid flight up the easy steps of the Palace stairway. At the next landing we separated, I darting down a corridor to the left in the direction of General Meyer’s apartments, the King mounting a further flight *en route* for the Schweigenkammer. I had traversed but half the distance to the General’s rooms when it became evident to me that I was no longer pursued. The reckless crew who had staked their all on the successful issue of their plot had wisely concentrated their energies on the main object of their desires—the capture or death of the royal quarry. For the life of me I found it impossible to carry out the King’s behest of rousing Meyer without first learning for certain whether he had reached in safety the friendly shelter of the silent room. As noiselessly as possible I retraced my steps down the passage, mounted the steps after the pursuing throng, and then peered cautiously down the corridor out of which the Schweigenkammer opened. A glance told me that the King had won his harbour of refuge, for the body of con-

spirators were gathered outside making noisy and desperate efforts to break through the door. I smiled, for I knew the thickness of that sound-deadening portal, and realising that King Karl was at least temporarily secure, I hastened to complete my mission of summoning the commander-in-chief. I found his room unlocked, and without waiting for an answer to my knock I burst in. I had expected to find the General in bed, but he was sitting half dressed in his armchair, holding in his hand a small bunch of pinks, and gazing with an expression of ludicrous rapture at a full-length photograph of Mrs. Van Troeber which adorned his dressing table.

It was several seconds before he managed to transfer his glance to myself.

"General," I said hastily, "there is a plot against the King. The Grand Duke and Max are in the Palace with half a dozen other conspirators, and they are besieging the King in the Schweigenkammer."

I expected to see him dash out of his chair with an oath, but he remained seated as he was, his long legs stretched luxuriously before him, a smile on his inscrutable face, a model of contemptuous impassivity.

"In the Schweigenkammer," he repeated slowly. "It will take them some time to break through that door."

"Doubtless," I said, irritated by his untimely calm. "And we must be thankful that we are given that time in which to act. His Majesty bade me tell you to summon loyal troops from Weissheim."

"Loyal troops from Weissheim ! Did his Majesty specify any particular battalion ? "

"No."

"Loyal troops, my dear Saunders, are not a plentiful commodity just at present, nor is Weissheim the most favourable spot in which to search for them. If I went round to the barracks now I should probably be shot. What is von Odenheimer doing ? "

"He is doing nothing—which speaks for itself."

"He has not put in an appearance ? " continued General Meyer. "I am surprised," and he shrugged his shoulders significantly, fixing his gaze once more on Mrs. Van Troeber's portrait.

I became aware that my temper was rising violently, but with an effort I held myself in.

"General Meyer," I said calmly, "have you any suggestion to make with regard to securing the King's preservation ? "

"Beautiful creature ! " he muttered to himself, still gazing at his divinity's presentment.

"I beg your pardon," he continued, turning dreamily to me. "Have I any suggestion to make ? Of course I have. If you wish to be by the King's side in the hour of danger, it is possible to fulfil your most creditable desire. It is necessary first to mount the staircase to the story above the Schweigenkammer. Open the corridor window and you can climb on to a small tiled roof of a comparatively easy pitch. If you can manage to crawl down this you will find that the right-hand corner of the eaves is furnished with a rain-water

pipe, and by means of this a descent may be made to the level of the Schweigenkammer window. It needs a little spring to reach the sill, but the masonry is rough hewn, and one can do wonders if one's heart is in one's work."

"Good," I said enthusiastically ; "we will try it."

"We ?" echoed the General sarcastically. "My dear Saunders, I am neither a monkey nor a steeple-jack."

"No," I retorted hotly, "merely a coward it seems." My companion sniffed his bunch of pinks with an expression of infinite rapture.

"A coward and a Jew," he said softly. "It does not need a brilliant intelligence to perceive that."

"Man alive !" I cried in amazement at his self-contemning admission ; "haven't you the pluck of a mouse ?"

Again he shrugged his shoulders indolently.

"I detest violence," he said simply. "And I value my skin at an absurdly high price. Before I met Mrs. Van Troeber I had an exaggerated detestation of facing death, and now," he continued, gazing fondly again at the photograph, "I am very much in love with life."

"A love that breeds cowardice is an ignoble passion," I retorted contemptuously. "Do you know what the King said of you ?"

He shook his head slowly with a smile of indifference.

"He said," I went on, "there are few men in the world I can trust : Meyer is one of them."

In a second my companion was sitting bolt upright in his chair gazing at me with piercing eyes.

"He said that?"

"He did," I replied.

A moment later he had sunk back again to his original position of exaggerated listlessness.

"No, my good Saunders," he said drily, "it won't do. Your plan to rouse my ardour was well meant, but a shade—ingenuous."

"In other words," I cried wrathfully, "I am a liar!"

"Will you swear he used those words?"

"I swear it as I hope for salvation."

"Swear it on your honour."

"I swear it on my honour!"

Slowly and deliberately, as if weighing every ounce of his decision, the commander-in-chief of the Grimland army rose from his seat. His face was calm and inscrutable as ever, but his right hand which he held out to me was trembling with excitement or fear.

"Saunders," he said hoarsely, "we must save the King. Worm your way into the Schweigenkammer, and I will do my best to worm out loyalty from Weissheim. Believe me, mine is not the least dangerous task of the two."

I took his hand in mine and looked him full in the eyes. He met my gaze with the shadow of a smile and then turned his head away.

"I would give untold gold for your temperament," he said. "Go, my good friend, go and prosper. You will need all your excellent nerve to reach the

Schweigenkammer, but the luck of the square-chinned men will be with you." And as he turned to put on his big military overcoat I left him.

Without a moment's delay I mounted the Palace stairs, and as I reached the corridor leading to the Schweigenkammer I saw that the enemy were still battering the massive door with ineffectual violence. Unperceived myself, I dashed up another flight to the floor above, and hastened to fling open the casement of the passage window. The half-moon was giving ample light, and the inrush of piercing air helped to nerve me for my dangerous climb. I noticed with dismay that the pent-house roof which it was necessary to descend was far steeper than I had anticipated, but I was still wearing my rubber-soled "Gouties," as they facetiously called our clumsy looking snow-boots, and I managed with the greatest care to creep down to the edge of the red-tiled slope. Had not the roof been cleared of snow my task would have been an easy one, though in that case I might have had difficulty in distinguishing the real eaves from a treacherous snow cornice. As it was, I lay at full length on my face and peered over the edge at the dizzy abyss into which a false step would land me. At the extreme right was the big leaden top of a rainwater pipe, and grasping the lip firmly with both hands I swung myself clear. For a moment I hung wriggling in space, and then my legs found the metal stem, and I began my cautious descent as a sailor swarms down a rope. As soon as my feet were level with the bottom of the Schweigenkammer window I halted. I could not by stretching

out my right leg to the uttermost so much as touch the projecting sill. I could not possibly retrace my steps, while to continue my descent was to land myself once more outside the Brun-varad. As General Meyer had said, the masonry was rough and irregular, and squeezing my right foot between two blocks of stone I threw my body towards the window, and succeeded in grasping the top of the green shutters which were fastened back flat against the wall. For a full minute I hung there, conscious that the chief danger was past, but incapable of taking the final steps which would land me in the comparative security of the Schweigenkammer. My heart beat heavily—almost audibly—and I hung there between heaven and earth in a condition that was mental blankness rather than acute fear. My nerve had failed me. Distasteful as is the memory, humiliating as is the recital, I must admit the truth, namely that for the moment I had ceased to be an efficient, self-controlling mortal. What restored my normal balance was neither shame nor desperation, still less, I fear, a revived anxiety for the King's safety ; but the purely selfish and not unreasonable dread that the King would discover my presence outside his window, and taking me for an enemy, empty his revolver into my defenceless body. The idea acted on me like a spur. Heedless of my dangerous position and the paralysing height at which I was operating, I swung my body to and fro till I had developed sufficient impetus, and then letting go with both hands, hurled myself against the window. My feet landed on the sill, one hand

grasped frantically at the stone mullion of the window, the other bursting through a pane of glass, clung torn and bleeding to a wooden sash-bar. The crash of breaking glass brought the King instantly to the window. He recognised me at once, and the astonished expression of his face is a thing I can remember with a smile to this day. In a second he had opened the casement and dragged me inside, and to my bewilderment and dismay kissed me warmly on both cheeks.

"Forgive me," he said, smiling at my embarrassment. "To-night my English proclivities are forgotten. I am a Grimlander."

Then he took his handkerchief from his pocket and proceeded, skilfully and almost tenderly, to bind up my lacerated hand. The traitors were thundering at the door, but though the massive oak shook on its immense hinges there seemed little immediate prospect of its yielding to their blows.

"Have you dispatched Meyer to Weissheim?" asked the King at the top of his voice so as to make himself heard above the uproar.

"Yes, sire." I shouted back.

"Good! I knew that he at any rate would not fail me. I suppose it was he, too, who told you how you could scramble down here."

"It was, sire."

"He knows the Palace like his glove, this wise old Jew. He will not fail, I feel confident, to fetch us the necessary help from Weissheim. However, let me tell you my plan of campaign in case the wolves break through before succour arrives.

Briefly it is this. The moment that the door shows signs of giving way we descend into the chamber below by means of the Zaubertisch. It might be possible to escape that way through the dark corridor, but it is probable that the Grand Duke, who also knows his Brun-varad, has posted some one there to block our egress. Any way the risk is too great, and we should be safer in the lower room than being hunted about the Palace like vermin."

"Have you secured the entrance to the lower chamber?" I broke in.

"I have already made a descent and locked and bolted the door, which is as strong as this one. It remains for us now to extinguish our lights so that their inrush, if it takes place, will be in confusion."

My companion proceeded to switch off all the lights with the exception of the one immediately over our heads, and, mounting a chair, unscrewed the glass bulbs one by one and tossed them carelessly into a corner. I followed his example, and the noise of exploding glass and the ceaseless thunderings on the door produced the illusion of a heavy battlefield. Conversation under the circumstances was impossible, and when we had destroyed all the lamps save one, the King proceeded cautiously towards the door with a view to examining its stability. As he did so the hammerings ceased, and we looked at each other with hopeful eyes, believing that the moment of relief was at hand. A second later a loud explosion took place, a stream of thick smoke issued from underneath the door, and the lower hinge was wrenched violently from the woodwork.

Our pursuers finding the door too stout to be forced by ordinary violence had emptied the powder from their cartridges and, setting a mine, had endeavoured to blow up that most substantial piece of joinery. In a twinkling the King had scrambled on to the circular table and motioned me to follow him. I did so and together we gazed anxiously at the shaken portal. The enemy redoubled the violence of their blows, and it was patent that a few moments more and the stout framework would no longer stand between us and our foes.

“We must fall back on our second line of defence,” said his Majesty, and so saying he leaned deliberately forwards and put his hand inside the grinning boar’s head over the mantelpiece. Instantly the table began to sink beneath us and as it did so the king raised his revolver and fired at the remaining electric light over our heads. The darkness that followed was comparative only, for the moonlight streamed through the open window and filled the ancient chamber with a soft illusive half-light and soft ghostly shadows. On the other hand, the nether chamber to which we descended was totally dark with the exception of the Zaubertisch itself, on to which a silver radiance fell through the circular aperture in the floor above. As soon as we had stepped safely on to the floor, the King groped his way to the door, and tried it to make sure that it was securely fastened. As he was returning a crash from above told us that the Schweigenkammer door had at length yielded to prolonged violence, and simultaneously we heard the rush of armed

men, a jangling of sabres, a confused chorus of oaths and cries, amongst which I distinguished the deep voices of the two Schattenbergs.

"Where the devil are they?" cried one.

"Lights, lights," cried another, and then to my amazement, a black object crashed down through the ceiling opening and lay sprawling and struggling on the faintly moonlit surface of the Zaubertisch.

"The Grand Duke," I cried, recognising the fierce features and swarthy beard of the arch-conspirator, and before I had time to recover from my surprise there was a crack and a flash, and the Grand Duke's scheming brain had ceased to dream of principalities and powers.

"Exit Schweinhund der Grosse," said the King callously, "Heaven send some of the lesser pig-dogs into our trap."

My spirits sank appreciably at his words, for I realized that the man whom I had risked so much to help, whose friend I had proudly called myself, was as fiercely bloodthirsty, as brutal almost, as the treacherous officers who were hungering for our blood. As he himself had said, to-night his English proclivities were forgotten and the Grimlander was predominant. Possibly circumstances excused the undesirable transformation.

My thoughts were interrupted by another flash—from above this time, and I knew that for the second time in my life I had been fired on. The fact that the Zaubertisch was lowered had now become apparent to our pursuers, whose eyes had accustomed themselves to the stinted light of the moon-beams,

and kneeling down by the edge of the aperture they fired haphazard at us rapidly and in all directions. The darkness which shrouded us was broken by the repeated flashes of their revolvers, and our position was rendered too exciting to be pleasant. Seizing me by the shoulder the King dragged me across the room, and a moment later we were standing in security within the deep recess of the great stone fireplace. The satisfaction of being under cover was considerable, and after a little more desultory firing the fusillade ceased. Believing that our antagonists were about to descend into our chamber and attack us at close quarters, we both peered out from our shelter. A lantern—procured I know not how or where—was being lowered through the hole, and holding the end of the string to which it was secured, and peering into the scantily illuminated depths of our chamber, was Max himself. It was a rash thing to do if a characteristic one, and I hastened to cover his lantern-lit face with a revolver. To have killed him would have been easy, but the very easiness of the task made it impossible. Changing my aim I fired at the lantern, and with a crash of breaking glass, the flame went out. In the darkness that followed I heard Max curse us with loud and sustained profanity.

“Why didn’t you fire at the man?” asked the King impatiently. “It was a simple shot.”

“Too simple,” I retorted curtly.

“Pulver und Blei!” he cried angrily. “Can’t you try and be a Grimlander. This is not sport, but a matter of life and death—and more. I would

shoot my own mother to-night if she were on the wrong side."

I did not answer, for I felt instinctively that argument would be wasted, reproof resented. I thought of the Princess Mathilde who had, as far as her intentions were concerned, spared me, and I was glad that I had not her brother's blood upon my hands.

CHAPTER XX

THERE are moments in the lives of the least self-conscious of us when we are forced to look into ourselves and to ask whether our emotions, admittedly strong, are pleasurable or the reverse. I know that as I stood in the friendly recess of that ancient fireplace, silently waiting in the darkness for the next movement of our enemies, I enquired doubtfully as to the nature of my own mental sensations. On the one hand there was the excitement of partaking in a remarkable adventure, of playing a fairly important part in a drama of European importance. On the other, there was the unpleasant conviction that I had interfered in a wolfish quarrel wherein I had no real part ; while the blood and suffering which were trivial and everyday matters to my opponents and fellow-fighter were repugnant and chilling to a peacefully brought up Londoner like myself. The conclusion of my introspective effort was, that I had been enjoying myself famously till I had begun to think, and that now I was very much the reverse of happy. Moreover, it is trying to the nerves to wait in pitchy darkness for the schemes of a ruthless and blood-thirsty enemy to develop at their leisure, and I kept

my eyes strained on the moonlit ceiling gap, expecting every instant to see the luminous circle blackened by human forms leaping down to join issue with us in a lightless fray.

"Time is on our side," said the King confidently in my ear.

"Time and a Jew," I said. "I hope Meyer's nerve won't fail him."

"You wrong him to suggest such a thing," retorted my companion. "He owes his exalted position entirely to my personal favour, and he will not fail me in the hour of need. Hush ! what's that ? "

There was a tread of hurried feet, and the disquieting silence maintained since the extinguishing of Max's lantern was broken with sudden violence. The relieving party was at hand ! There was no mistaking the meaning of those rousing revolver shots, the clashing of steel, the oaths, cries, stumblings and unmaning groans. The heavy pounding of feet shook the ceiling over our heads, dislodging the plaster from the venerable joists, and as the noise of the conflict swelled fiercer and louder I felt the King's grasp tighten on my arm.

"Our place is up there," he said sternly.

I disagreed with him totally, but had not the moral courage to say so.

To obtrude ourselves into that desperate mêlée was to court disaster alike from friend and foe.

"Mount the table," said the King imperatively, and in silence I obeyed him. A moment later he was by my side.

"Where is the lever?" he cried groping in the darkness.

I had not the faintest idea, and said so.

"Strange," he muttered. "I could have sworn it ought to be here."

"Where?"

"Here, projecting from the wall at the height of my head."

"Perhaps a stray shot struck it," I hazarded.

My idea seemed plausible and an instant later my companion was on the floor groping in search of the broken handle.

A little cry told me that he had found it, that my thoughtless guess had hit the truth. I was relieved, for it meant that the fury-shaken Schweigenkammer was inaccessible to us. It is one thing to join issue in a fair fight; it is quite another to emerge slowly from the floor into the centre of a desperate conflict, the easy victim of the first enemy who sets his eyes on you.

The King took his place again at my side the prey to disappointment and unconcealed agitation.

Gradually the sounds above our head diminished. There came one final pistol shot; then all was still.

A voice called down to us, General Meyer's voice.

"Your Majesty."

"Yes."

"The enemy are satisfactorily accounted for. It is quite safe to come up. I have sent for lights."

"Thank you, Meyer," replied the King. "If you will kindly press the lever in the boar's mouth, we

will ascend. The lower lever has met with an accident, otherwise we should not have remained down here."

Slowly the Zaubertisch mounted again towards its original position, and if our re-appearance on the scene bore any analogy to the clown's entry in Pantomime, the sight that met our gaze, as our heads emerged above the floor line, swept all flippant imaginings from my brain. Some one had fetched some candles, and by their flickering light I saw that the floor was covered thick with dead and dying men. Of our late adversaries not one remained alive, and I noticed with horror a fearfully gashed head that had once been Max's.

We waited for the top of the Zaubertisch to reach the level of the floor before stepping off, but when about a foot below, it stopped abruptly, and fearing some breakdown of the machinery the King and I stepped up hastily off on to the floor of the Schweigenkammer.

Looking down, I saw with disgust that the leg of the Grand Duke's body, which still lay on the table's surface, was protruding over the edge and causing the unexpected stoppage in our ascent.

General Meyer saluted us, pale but smiling, his sword wet with the blood of the King's enemies, his cheek crimson with his own.

"They are all dead, sire," he said simply.

"And our side?"

"Lieutenant Aufermann of the Guides is no more, and Captain Traun-Nelidoff, I regret to say, is in extremis. Zuos is suffering from a bullet in the

thigh, whilst I myself have a trifling scratch on my right cheek."

"It becomes you marvellously well. Who else has helped to-night?"

"Schneider is here," replied the General, and at his words the detective stepped forward, and favoured us with a profound bow. He was dressed in evening dress and an old student's smoking cap, and he held a revolver in one hand and a sword in the other. "He fought most valiantly," continued Meyer. "He it was who brought down Max when that excitable young gentleman was engaged in the amusing process of slicing his Commander-in-chief's face."

"I struck him from behind," broke in the detective hurriedly. "I was a good swordsman in my youth, and my blow nearly clove his skull in twain."

"So I see," said the King coldly, a shadow of disgust on his gloomy features. "Well, Meyer, you shan't regret this night's work, nor you, Schneider, nor Zuos and the others. But it is too soon to talk of rewards yet. Where is Father Bernhard?"

"I will go and fetch him," I said, for if ever there was work for a priest it was within the blood-splashed walls of that stricken chamber.

As I went I wondered if the other denizens of that huge but scantily inhabited palace had been roused by the prodigious noise of the night's conflict. That the Queen must have known that trouble was in progress was certain, though with what hopes and anxieties she awaited the issue it was impossible to say.

My thoughts wandered rather to Miss Anchester, and when I reflected that she slept in the children's wing right at the other extremity of the building, I considered it quite likely that the sounds of firing had failed to break her deep and healthy slumbers.

When I reached Father Bernhard's room I found it empty. The windows, as always, were wide open and the room bitterly cold. The bed, though now unoccupied, had evidently been slept in. That its late occupant had been roused by the hammerings on the Schweigenkammer door was not surprising seeing that his room also was situated in the Waffenthurm. The question was, what steps had he taken on being roused. His loyalty was beyond doubt and his combative instincts more than suspected, and I should not have been surprised had he been found among our deliverers settling accounts with his old enemy. In vain I wandered down the passage calling him by name.

Retracing my steps, I looked in various rooms where he might possibly have been, but without success. In despair I descended into the hall, and looking round, my eyes lighted on the unfortunate Herr Bömcke still propped up in his corner in a position of inanimate collapse. I approached with charitable intent, and as I did so he groaned feebly and regarded me with a bloodshot and unutterable gloomy eye. He had apparently been struck roughly on the head, and his shirt front and coat were discoloured and sticky from an ugly scalp wound. A brief examination showed me that he

was no longer bleeding and that his condition was not such as to cause anxiety.

"The fierceness of man ! The fierceness of man ! " he muttered. " O Lord, is it possible that such things can be ? "

" Cheer up, Bömcke," I said, smiling at his somewhat incoherent pathos. " His Majesty is quite safe."

" I am glad to hear it," he said solemnly. " I have served his Majesty, as a man of peace, five and twenty years come next Messzeit. To think that I should live to be struck on the head by a boy with the butt of a revolver."

" Max did it then ? Well, Max is dead."

" And his Royal Highness, the Grand Duke ? "

" Is dead also."

" God be thanked. O Lord, thou art avenged by thy servant."

" Bömcke," I said severely, " you are becoming religious, and it does not suit you at all. Talking of religion, do you know where Father Bernhard is ? "

He shook his dilapidated head and moaned a negative.

I turned away to resume my search, and there, within ten paces of me and enveloped in a long black overcoat, stood the object of my quest.

He was standing perfectly motionless beside one of the squat Doric pillars which support the staircase-landing, and his habitually severe countenance was sterner than ever.

" What do you want ? " he asked brusquely in his deep tones.

"Your presence is required in the Schweigenkammer—immediately," I said.

"Why?"

"There has been an attempt on the King's life—"

"I know, why do they want me?"

"There has been trouble, fighting. Men have been wounded, even to death, and they need a priest's offices."

Father Bernhard laughed gloomily.

"Let them get a priest then," he said. "I am one no more. It is no longer Father Bernhard who speaks with you, but Bernhard the apostate. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not in the least."

"Listen then. I was roused from my sleep by furious bangings and the sounds of excited voices. I robed myself hastily and descended the stairs, and passing the corridor which leads to the Schweigenkammer, I saw the Grand Duke, his son, and others, trying to break down the door. The true condition of affairs was at once manifest to me, and as I went in search of arms and assistance I thanked my God, for I thought it possible I might be killed, that I might die fighting for my King and honour, and be delivered from the powers of the Evil One. Unfortunately, Abaddon was in the ascendant, Abaddon and his trusty attendant Aschmedai. I went to find loyal men and I found, God help me, I found a disloyal woman."

"The Queen!"

He bowed assent.

"Well?" I said.

"Must I go on? Must I humiliate myself utterly. She bade me let events take their course, she told me not to interfere with a quarrel which God would decide in the best way. To my shame I obeyed her. Together, hand in hand, we awaited the issue of the conflict, and when we learned that the King was rescued we determined to take the only course open to traitors—flight."

In spite of the terrible emotion which dominated the self-condemned priest there was a stern tranquillity in his demeanour which argued a finality of resolve which I should assail in vain.

For some reason his lapse angered me.

"Father Bernhard," I said, as calmly as I could, "you're a damned fool."

"Aye," he said, "you could not speak truer words. A fool damned and irredeemable."

"I wasn't thinking of your soul," I said irritably. "I'm sick of souls. The Queen thinks she has a soul, whereas she is little better than—"

But Father Bernhard was holding up a warning hand, and a second later the object of my smothered rebuke was also standing before me. Doubtless she had been accompanying her guilty lover when I chanced upon the scene, and in a rare moment of shame had concealed herself behind the priest's tall form and the thick stem of the Doric column.

Her face was extraordinarily pale and her eye blazed with anger and excitement.

"Kill him," she said breathlessly, pointing to me.

"I shall not harm him unless he tries to stop us," replied the priest.

"Stop you?" I repeated.

"Yes," cried the Queen excitedly. "We are leaving this wretched snow-bound country, this mouldering palace, this icy land of tyranny and unbelief. Do you think it would be safe for me here with my frenzied husband when he discovers that it was I who drugged Odenheimer and the guard. I hear that not a man of the conspirators is left alive. Do you think that he would spare me, who loathe him and have schemed him against, aye, and will scheme against him till my last breath."

"His Majesty would not raise his hand against a woman," I protested. "Still less against his wife."

She laughed hysterically.

"He would shoot me where I stood," she cried, "or rather he would confine me in the shaft of the Zaubertisch to let me perish of starvation."

"Nonsense," I said soothingly, for I felt it was my duty to strive to avert a domestic tragedy. "The King is neither a butcher nor a maniac. My influence with him is strong just now, for I have been of great service to him, and if you remain I will guarantee that no violence is offered you."

It was the priest who replied.

"The die is cast," he said solemnly. "I have so sinned in thought and word that to sin in deed is hardly to darken the pitchy blackness of my soul."

"Souls again!" I cried angrily, "and what about her Majesty's soul?"

"My soul is white before God," said the Queen fervently, raising a plump arm heavenwards. "I am not acting rashly nor without much consideration

and prayerful thought. I know now that to remain longer with a blood-guilty atheist would be the true sin."

"Whilst elopement with a renegade priest would be a true virtue?"

Her eyes blazed hatred at me.

"Brutal Englishman," she cried spittingly, "like all your countrymen you have the spirit of a pig. Know this, that God can forgive all things, purify all things, and that his mightiest instrument is love."

I turned away in despair. If it was futile to argue with a patriotic woman, to do so with a religiously pervert was a still greater waste of breath. Assuredly fate had never thrown a stranger, worse assorted couple together than that faithless priest and faithless wife. The former thought the devil ministered personally to his pleasures, the latter that her Creator did so.

"May I ask where you propose going?" I enquired, more to gain time than from a desire for information.

"The Grand Duke's sleigh is still standing at the door," said Father Bernhard. "It will take us as far as Kurdeburg where we take the early train to Vienna. It is useless trying to pursue us, for our horses are fleet and at the Grand Duke's orders the telegraph wires have been cut in all directions."

"Useless if you once leave the Brun-varad."

"You will not prevent us doing that," said the priest sternly, producing a revolver. "That is the Queen's present to me, my wedding present, and if

I do not wish to kill you with it, it is because I like you personally, not because murder is a sin."

"I too have a present, though not I fear a wedding one," I said, tapping my breast pocket where the Schattenberg's revolver lay, "but I have seen too much blood spilt to-night to wish to see the colour of it again. Go, if you must go, and may your good friends Abaddon and Aschmedai give you some compensation for the death-pangs of your soul. Who knows that when they have done with you, the good angels of Common Sense and Honest Work may not turn you once again into a normal healthy-minded mortal."

He passed his hand across his brow and regarded me with a strained look that had little comprehension in it.

"Don't talk like that," he said, "or you will convert me. --I don't want to be converted. I can face the prospect of hell, but not the agony of retracing my downward steps. Come, your Majesty, let us depart."

I stepped aside and bowed, keeping my eyes on the Queen's pale face. She looked fixedly at me with an intensity of expression which I was incapable of analysing, and then favoured me with a scarcely perceptible inclination of her head. Then, as she neared the door leaning on her companion's arm, she looked back, something fluttered to the floor—a carnation!

I heard a muttered "Gedächtniss," and the door closed behind them. There was a jingling of sleigh bells, and the wretched creature and her devil-

ridden paramour were off on their wild night's drive to shame and ignominy.

I picked up her worthless token, and advancing to the open fireplace wherein a dying fire still feebly burned, thrust it into the heart of the glowing embers. Then I hastened to mount the stairs again to inform his Majesty of this latest happening to his fortunes.

As I entered the Schweigenkammer the King anticipated my speech.

"You are too late, Saunders, the gallant Traun-Nelidoff is no more."

"May I have a word with you alone, in private, sire?"

"Certainly, only it shall not be in the Schweigenkammer. Meyer, I leave you in command. Do all that is necessary, and remember that the Brunvarad is under martial law. Gentlemen, I wish you good-night."

Putting his hand on my shoulder the King led me from the room.

"You could not find Father Bernhard?" he asked.

"I found him and the Queen," I replied. "They are now in the Grand Duke's sleigh en route for Kurdeburg."

"Fled?"

"Eloped! There is passion on the one side, and something rather lower on the other. Do you know that her Majesty caused von Odenheimer and his men to be drugged?"

"Meyer told me they had been drugged, and I

suspected whose handiwork it was. Anyway, she is gone, that is the main thing. My luck has turned with a vengeance."

"You are glad?"

"I am in Heaven. As a bachelor you cannot appreciate my sensations of relief. Come into my study and we will drink to their bon-voyage."

CHAPTER XXI

“**A**RE you going to bed to-night?” asked the King, as I seated myself in one of his comfortable armchairs and watched him mix me a powerful whisky and soda.

I consulted my watch. It was ten minutes past six.

“I think so,” I replied. “There is the Caledonian Medal to be played for.”

His Majesty laughed.

“How our rivals of the curling rink would rejoice to know of our nerve shattering experiences to-night. I guarantee Colonel Stuart and the keener Scotchmen were all in bed by ten. Have a cigar?”

“Thanks. Personally I regard over-training as a great danger. Give me two hours’ sleep and a good breakfast and I am ready for as hard a day’s sport as Weissheim can offer me.”

“Bravo! There speaks the Englishman. By the way, Saunders, what reward would you like for this evening’s work. I am not going to try and thank you, that is beyond my powers. Would you like to be a baron?”

I shook my head.

"I am a linen-draper and an Englishman," I replied, "and my friends of the Portland Club have a keen sense of humour."

"Why not live out here. I assure you this night's work has settled our dynastic troubles for many a long day."

"It is impossible, sire. I have my business in London to think of."

"I thought that was the last thing you ever thought of."

"To-night my eyes have been opened to the realities of life. I appreciate the true inwardness of the phrase 'cumbering the ground.'"

"I am sorry," said my companion thoughtfully, "for I love you like a brother, far more than most brothers love each other. You must come out here regularly every year. It will be good for your health and for my peace of mind. Also I insist on giving you some memento of this evening's work. Money you do not need, but we have a gew-gaw called the order of the Black Ostrich. Princes of the blood and members of reigning houses are alone eligible for the first-class, but I should like to present you with the second-class, set in brilliants, if I may."

"I should value it enormously, sire, as a token of your personal friendship."

"Excellent; that is settled then. Meyer must have a barony, Schneider a thousand pounds and a tie-pin, Zuos and the others third-class Black Ostriches and promotion. Saunders, have you ever been in love?"

"If it wasn't so late, sire, I should blush."

“You have then, eh? Good. So have I, and the person I was in love with was the Princess Charlotte von und zu Kreide-Hügelstadt. Unfortunately, I married her, and as Queen and Consort I found her infinitely less attractive than the high-spirited, somewhat flighty Princess I had fixed my youthful fancies on. The fierce light that beats upon a throne seemed to blight all her better qualities and force to an unnatural growth the meaner characteristics of her nature. Love of display, vanity, desire for popularity, extravagance, these were a few of the lesser evils that I saw, with dismay, swelling and growing with alarming aggrandizement. Then she began to develop a temper, and I groaned, for if irritability in man is an unbearable fault, in woman it is a damning one. Still, I ground my teeth and bore it, bore it like a most Christian King, for I had chosen her out as my wife, and, as far as in me lay, I was determined that the compact should be loyally maintained. Then finally she began to develop a soul. That was fatal. A woman with a soul is a mad cat and a parrot rolled into one, and I learned that marriage ties may be more burdensome than a convict’s chains. On the whole I supported my martyrdom fairly well. She discovered I was unorthodox in my views, and breathed hell fire on me in the grey hours of the early morning. I tried flippancy as a retaliatory force, but my wife’s soul left no room for any sense of humour. She began to loathe me with the loathing of a religious fanatic, and, as is inevitable in such cases, she began to look for spiritual consol-

tion elsewhere. The Archbishop of Weidenbruck, who is as time-serving an old scoundrel as ever donned a cassock, encouraged her in her antagonistic attitude towards me, and she threw herself figuratively, and, for all I know or care, literally, into the arms of the Grand Duke. She played at treason, and though fear for her over-massaged skin kept her long from crossing the Rubicon, she dallied with the alluring game till its fascinations ultimately mastered her. You know her character nearly as well as I do, and if you are a wise man you will blame her as little as I do. A hypertrophied super-sensitive soul is a disease, and has driven more women to deadly sin than want, luxury or ennui."

"Heaven help poor old Father Bernhard," I yawned. "If your Majesty will excuse me, I will go to bed. I want a clear eye and a steady hand for the Medal competition."

"Good-night then. Schlafen Sie gut. Personally I remain awake for the rest of the night, for I have many things to think of."

Bidding his Majesty good-night, I sought my room, and casting off my clothes and extinguishing the light I jumped into bed, wondering if I had ever felt less predisposed for slumber in my life. Then the events of the day blended into a strange impossible medley, wherein Grand Dukes and toboggans, fascinating princesses and magic tables, moved inconsequently in a halo of revolvers to the strains of *La lettre de Manon*. I was awakened at 9.30 by the King, who was attired in a suit of pyjamas and his flowery dressing gown.

"I've just had a bath," he began. "Slept well?"

"Like a church, sire. Is there any fresh news?"

"None, except that I have just made Meyer a Baron. He is as happy as a school boy; I fancy he is thinking of a certain American widow who was intended by nature to bear a title as well as the treasures of Golconda. We are putting Weissheim under martial law, and the people will rather like it. If they cannot have a revolution they will have the next best thing. We shall publish shortly our official account of the night's tragedy, and when the populace learn that it was my hand which despatched the Grand Duke, their goodwill towards me will increase by leaps and bounds."

"I thought the Grand Duke was popular," I objected.

"So he was. But the Grimlander is romantic, and the fact that I have shed blood will be counted unto me for righteousness. Henceforth my position will be an easy and comparatively safe one."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," I said, getting out of bed and looking out of the window. The sun was still behind the Klauigberg and the sky was of the pale blue which heralded another perfect day.

"How about the children?" I pursued. "Were they disturbed?"

"No, they slept the sleep of the innocent. So did the Fraülein von Helder and Miss Anchester. Now hurry up, my dear fellow, and get dressed, for the Medal play begins at 10.30."

"Do you feel like running up a good score, sire?" I inquired, casting off the warm *duvet*.

"I shall not compete. I have a busy morning before me. By the way, I would rather you did not mention the events of last night to anybody."

"Naturally, sire."

"Well, I must go and dress. Good luck attend you on the curling rink!"

I hastened to perform my toilet, and attacked my usual breakfast of boiled eggs and honey with an even better appetite than usual. As the church clock struck the half hour, I presented myself at the Pariserhof curling rink. The attendance was good, the only conspicuous absentee being his Majesty, who sent a message through me that important business prevented him from taking part in the competition. Rumours that there had been troubles of a political nature were prevalent on the ice, but there was nothing unusual in that, and in the strenuous atmosphere of the competition they were soon forgotten.

Modesty and a respect for my reader's patience forbids my going into details of that morning's play. Let it suffice that I could do nothing wrong, that fortune so favoured me that I grew tired of her unfailing blandishments, and at the luncheon interval I had amassed such a score that my ultimate victory was regarded by every one as a moral certainty. As I turned my steps towards the Palace, where lunch awaited me, I saw Miss Anchester and her Royal charges preceding me in the same direction. They had evidently been amongst the numerous

onlookers, and I rejoiced to think that my remarkable accuracy had been watched by so critical a spectator as the Governess. Not without a desire for her congratulations I hastened to overtake her.

"Good-morning," she said, in answer to my salutations, "have you noticed the Fish?"

"The Fish?"

"The white cloud that hangs about the base of the Klauigberg. It is creeping up the valley. We shall have bad weather."

I was annoyed, for I had anticipated congratulations, not a disquisition on the weather.

"I do not mind the least," I answered. "The principal sporting events of the season are over—or as good as over—and I return to England next week."

"You are selfish."

"For returning to England?"

"Good gracious, no. For not minding what the weather is like when you are gone."

"The dry air of Weissheim is conducive to cold-heartedness," I replied. "By the way, did you see me curl this morning?"

"We did. You ought to win the Medal if you keep your head."

"I have not the slightest intention of losing it."

"The Medal or your head?"

"I shall lose neither."

"Your self-confidence is touching."

"The small amount of confidence deposited in me by others is more than touching."

Miss Anchester laughed.

"You think we ought to back you more enthusiastically?"

"I do."

"Why?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"We are all from the Brun-varad," I said.

"You are a guest of his Majesty, I a paid dependant."

"The distinction lacks point" I said, irritably, and for some moments we walked on in silence. As we neared the Palace the Governess broke it.

"I should not have said what I did about being a paid dependant," she said, "it was an example of a very rare thing—female snobbishness. But I was angry with you. Do you know why?"

"I cannot imagine."

"I will tell you later. In the meantime make a good lunch and keep your nerves steady for this afternoon's play. Our good wishes will be with you."

Wondering vaguely at her cryptic utterances, and concluding that I must have in some way contrived to offend her at the Schattenberg's ball, I proceeded to carry out her excellent advice on the subject of maintaining nerve tone.

We sat down four to lunch, the King, Baron Meyer, Schneider and myself, and I was rather hurt that no one made any inquiries as to my performance on the curling rink. Very little indeed was said at all, but I gathered that Weissheim had been put under martial law, that the town was full of wild rumours which would shortly be set at rest by a

royal proclamation giving a true account of the unsuccessful attempt on the King's person ; further, that the general situation, though not devoid of tension and anxiety, was on the whole as satisfactory as could be expected, and gave promise of a calmer and more settled state of feeling.

So much I gathered by piecing together the brief disjointed remarks which my companions threw out from time to time to each other, and from the air of strenuous but fairly cheerful pre-occupation which they all wore. My presence indeed was ignored almost to the point of rudeness, and had not my common sense told me that these three had been busying themselves on matters of considerably more importance than curling, and that time was necessary before they could descend to the trivialities of sport and pleasure, I might have been offended. As it was I carried out my scheme of sustaining nerve tone with silent efficiency and a certain measure of critical amusement.

Finally I rose, begging to be excused on the ground that my presence was demanded on the ice.

"Certainly, certainly," said the King, in answer to my request, "Go, and success attend you ! How have you been doing ?"

"Very well, sire. Every one regrets that you are unable to take part in the competition."

"That is very kind of every one. I am afraid our pre-occupation has caused you a very dull meal."

"Not at all, sire ; I merely regret that I am unable to be of any use to you in your deliberations."

"Your work is done, Saunders, and marvellously well done, too. Happily the man of action is no longer required."

"Merely the man of brains!"

The King laughed good naturedly.

"I should be sorry to exclude you from that category," he said. "But what we are dealing with now is detail. In this detail we want the specially trained faculties of the soldier, the detective, and the Sovereign. The first two rôles are admirably filled, as you know, by our friends here. The last is indifferently filled by myself, but unhappily there is no substitute."

"Say rather, 'happily,' sire. With your permission I go to uphold the honour of the Brunvarad on the curling rink."

On arriving once more on the scene of play I discovered that rumours and reports had been multiplied and magnified to such an extent, that it was believed in some quarters that His Majesty's absence from the ranks of the competitors was due to a dagger wound in the Royal abdomen, in others that that tension between the King and Queen had culminated in an attack of wife-beating of unparalleled ferocity. To such and similar legends I gave the lie unqualified, stating that I had lunched with his Majesty, who was in excellent health, and who was about to give to the world a true account of the incidents from which these wild reports had originated. More I refused to say, and was accordingly somewhat sniffed at as a superior person.

Of the afternoon's play little need be said, except that it bore a striking resemblance to the morning's. Inwicks, outwicks, drawings to the tee, chippings of the winner, were feats I performed with astonishing regularity, and had it not been for the extraordinary interest manifested by my rivals, and the consciousness that Miss Anchester's grey eyes were upon me, I should have been bored to death by the unfailing consistency of my good fortune. As it was, I achieved a score which remains an easy record at Weissheim to this day.

At the conclusion of play I received the congratulations of the curling fraternity with becoming modesty, and the commonplace regret that we could not all be winners. Then I turned to where Miss Anchester was sitting with the Royal children, and as I did so, a great sound of cheering broke on my ears. Instantly it occurred to me that the news of my further success had been communicated to the good Weissheimers, and that the double winner of the Grimland Derby and Caledonian Medal was about to receive an ovation even more enthusiastic and warm-hearted than that which had been accorded me on the previous afternoon. I approached Miss Anchester and her Royal charges, determined at last to receive her congratulations, and wondering whether they would be expressed in the coldest and most formal terms, or whether in a spirit of ironical exaggeration such as she had employed in toasting the winner of the Grimland Derby. I recalled with a smile her supercilious comment after my first essay on the curling rink, how she

had informed me that with practice and patience I might well attain to the position of a "Number two," or even conceivably a "Number three," if there was a dearth of good players on the ice. Now that I had won, hands down, the trophy which most of my opponents would have given ten years of their enthusiastic lives to call their own, I determined to remind her good humouredly of her words. Louder and nearer grew the sounds of the cheering, and I was about to address to her my smiling taunt when suddenly, and, to my thinking, somewhat rudely, she turned away in the direction of the rousing sounds. I followed her gaze and a moment later I knew that it was not in my honour that the frosty air was being shaken with hoarse cries. At the head of a great throng stalked the tall ponderous figure of the King; his head was bare, his brown face wreathed in smiles, and following him, shouting, crying, tossing fur caps and woollen berets high into the air, were the good excitable folks of Weissheim. Immediately behind him and at the head of the following throng, were General Meyer with his plastered face, and a limping officer who had been one of our rescue party, and in the crowd itself representatives of every trade or profession in the town. Soldiers, wood-carvers, publicans, leather-workers, masons and shoemakers vied with each other in doing vociferous honour to their old King and new found hero. As his Majesty passed the Pariserhof rinks, the curlers, amongst whom the broad facts of the King's danger and escape were now recognised, took up the roaring tribute, and

joined their wild curling cries to the deep-throated applause.

"Long live King Karl! Vivat Majestät! Sehr gut gespielt!"

Miss Anchester, a gleam of excitement in her grey eyes, mounted the seat she had been occupying, and flaunting her handkerchief and almost dancing with exhilaration, raised her clear tones in honour of the happy Sovereign.

My trifling humiliation at finding that I was not the real recipient of the cheering disappeared instantaneously in the prevailing atmosphere of enthusiasm, and waving my cap aloft I gave vent to a particularly forcible "Vivat Majestät." The King's eyes fell on me, and advancing to me he shook me warmly by the hand.

"How did you get on at the competition?" he asked.

"I won it, sire."

"Bravo!" he called loudly. "My friends, Herr Saunders, the winner of the Grimland Derby, has also carried off the Caledonian Medal. Three cheers for Herr Saunders."

The bathos of the situation seemed to strike the audience, for there was laughter mingled in their cheering, but it was all very good-natured and inspiring, and I doffed my cap repeatedly in acknowledgment.

"Not only that," pursued the King, around whom the crowd had now gathered as about one of whom a speech was expected. "It was Mr. Saunders who saved my life last night. You have

read my official proclamation describing how a friend escaping from the toils of our enemies in the Marienkastel, tobogganed at night without rakes down the Kastel run in order to anticipate the traitors who had already started on their dastardly journey. That was Herr Saunders (cheers). How the same friend clambered down a rainwater pipe, and with the utmost difficulty and at the utmost risk succeeded in scrambling into the Schweigenkammer to be beside me in the moment of peril. That was Herr Saunders."

There was no mistaking the purport of those cheers now, and as I stood there bare-headed, facing that shouting crowd, I felt the same thrill of perfect joyousness as when six years before I had just completed my half century in the 'Varsity Match. Applause is an intoxicating thing. It raises one to the level of the gods; for the moment one treads the clouds, one's head is in the stars, the earth becomes a puny sphere supremely dominated by the imperial ego. The cheers of the excitable Weissheimers mounted to my brain, and the genial plaudits of my fellow countrymen acted on me like strong wine. I reeled, figuratively, with the debauch of acclamation, and then as the King passed on and the noise of the multitude grew faint, my pulses slowed and the depression of the stale reveller assailed me. I had lived, I had tasted the strongest of life's wine, and I must henceforth drink of water. The re-action was too acute, too sudden to be normal. The exhilaration should have lasted longer, died slower in a healthy spirit, and

I almost groaned, for I knew that my spirit was not healthy, but sick of the fever that men call love. I looked round, and of the throng that had been shouting themselves hoarse at the mention of my name scarce one individual remained. The curlers, each disappointed of his secret expectations, had donned their greatcoats and were wending their way back towards the Pariserhof, where the delights of hot chocolate and "Bridge" awaited them. The noisy Weissheimers were still following their tardily appreciated Sovereign, and would doubtless make a patriotic demonstration before the Brun-varad. In that case fresh cheers might await me did I so choose, for I had but to appear on the balcony of some window for the excitable throng to scream themselves hoarse at the sight. In my present mood nothing would have been more distasteful. Life seemed a raw, unsatisfying thing, and to be forced to smile and smirk and bow to a yelping multitude was beyond the range of the endurable. Vaguely I desired Miss Anchester's society, but she had gone on ahead joining herself to the crowd. Perhaps it was as well, I reflected, for in my present mood her usual tone of calm superiority and chilling reproof might have led to verbal reprisals considerably less courteous than my ordinary tolerably uncivil retorts.

An idea struck me. What was happening at the Marienkastel? How had the Princess borne the disastrous news of her bereavement? My conscience smote me for not having turned my thoughts that way before. Unwilling to return to

the crowd-invested Palace I determined to wander up to the path that fringed the Kastel run as far as the Princess's home, and make inquiries as to her condition.

CHAPTER XXII

AS I toiled laboriously up the steep ascent by the Kastel run I noted the familiar landmarks of the course, contrasting the rate of my present progress with that of the previous night's descent. Approaching the Marienkastel I noticed with surprise that a couple of soldiers were standing by the gate, and as I came up to them they barred my further progress by crossing their rifles in front of me. I had no particular desire to enter the building, but I required information.

"Is the Prinzessin within?" I demanded.

"Yes, Excellency."

"And no one is permitted to enter?"

"Not without a permit, Excellency."

"Is any one else here?" I asked after a pause.

"The Herr Schneider is also within."

Herr Schneider! What the deuce was he doing, I wondered, and knowing his sentiments towards the Princess I began to feel uneasy.

"Kindly inform the Herr that Herr Saunders is without and desires an entrance."

The man hesitating, I backed my authoritative manner with a five Krone piece. The result was satisfactory, and a minute later the detective himself emerged from the castle and secured my admission.

His broad face was illuminated by an expression of joyous excitement, and his restless eyes were eloquent of profound self-satisfaction.

"You look happy," I could not help remarking.

He put his hand to his cravat wherein was fixed a large and rather vulgar diamond pin.

"It has been a great day," he said. "Much good fortune has come already my way but the best fortune still awaits me."

"How so?"

"I have an order from the King," he said, patting his breast pocket, "empowering me to arrest the Prinzessin. The events of last night have had an extraordinarily hardening effect on his Majesty's nature, and his feelings towards women are especially bitter. Acting on my advice, he has not only ordered the Princess's arrest, but so worded the order that I should be justified in taking extreme measures in the event of any attempt at escape or resistance on her part."

"A most improbable contingency," I remarked.

"I hope so," said my companion, and his shifty eyes finally shot into their respective corners and looked wickedly cunning. We were in the building now, and I noticed that the floral decorations of the previous evening were still left untouched, and, in view of what had befallen the House, their festive air was grimly inappropriate.

"Have you notified to the Princess that she is under arrest?" I demanded.

"I have. She is now considering my proposal."

"Your proposal?"

"Precisely. My proposal of marriage. If she consents to be my wife, I am confident that my influence with his Majesty can procure her pardon and release. If she refuses," here he brought out a revolver and tapped it against the palm of his fleshy hand. "Well, she will have made a most determined effort to escape."

By great good fortune I succeeded in choking down the exclamation of disgust that rose to my lips. Such villainy as this was fitly met neither by rebuke nor violence, but by guile.

"You are a genius," I said in a forced voice of admiration.

The toadlike features lighted up with manifest pleasure at the compliment.

"And yet you once thought me ambitious!" he said. "So I was, but not over-ambitious. At length I am in a winning position, and I run no risks. I shall not be content merely with an ordinary promise to marry me, but she must swear to do so on her mother's soul, and the souls of her dead father and brother."

The man made me feel physically sick.

"A most business-like arrangement," I said coolly. "Where is she?"

"In the little Rothe Saal making up her mind."

"May I go and see her? Perhaps I can help her make it up."

"By all means," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "I feel sure your splendid worldly wisdom will convince her that the disadvantages of marry-

ing into the middle classes are less than those of a bullet through the spinal cord."

Not trusting myself to answer him, I advanced to the door of the Rothe-saal, an apartment on the ground floor to the right of the ball-room. I had been in the room before, and it was a fair-sized chamber with long red panels in rococo framing, and contained portraits of the late Grand Duke and his exceedingly handsome Duchess. The windows which opened down to the ground gave on to the garden, and looking out one could see the commencement of the Kastel run some hundred yards away. In the room I found the Princess. To my surprise she was dressed in tobogganning costume, but her young face bore the sad tokens of mourning more legibly than any scheme of attire could possibly have done. The change indeed, from her normal appearances, was pathetic in the extreme. The careless laughter, the heedless joy in life, no longer shone in her dark-rimmed eyes or showed in her pale features. Like Herr Bömcke, trouble had robbed her of her conspicuous attributes, only in her case the residue was more appreciable ; joy, indeed was killed, vivacity was crushed, but there remained pride and the unconquerable courage of the Schattenbergs. Her eyes met mine fearlessly, but the utter hopelessness of their expression moved me deeply.

"I am sorry to intrude upon your sorrow," I began, "neither will I weary you with expressions of sympathy, though I would ask you to believe that I feel deeply for you. I merely come here with the intention of serving you."

"You and I have been playing a stern game," she said softly, "and now that you have won all along the line I am too good a sportswoman not to congratulate you on your courage and resourcefulness. Nevertheless, it is too much to expect me to accept your help."

"Cannot the nobility which congratulates the victor, bring itself also to accept his good services?"

She shook her head mournfully.

"For you personally," she said, "I have nothing but liking and respect. Your conduct last night, which I have learned of from Herr Schneider's lips, was a splendid mixture of audacity and resource. The trick you played on me I willingly forgive, for my own duplicity fully warranted it, but I cannot forget that but for you my father and brother would be alive to-day."

"And those who are alive to-day would be even as they are now. I merely did my duty, as you did yours, but Fate set us on opposite sides. And yet of the actual blood of your family I am guiltless. Several times last night I was fired upon, but only once did I pull the trigger of my revolver, and then it was at a lantern I aimed, though I had your brother at my mercy."

"Is that so?" she asked and her eyes seemed to wait eagerly for the affirmative that followed.

"Then I am very glad," she said, and the first tinge of colour that came into her cheeks did me good to see.

"Now," I said, "will you accept my help?"

"I am under arrest, I know," she said, "but I do not mind."

"Do you value your life?"

For answer she made a gesture indicating the nature of her garb.

"In my father's lifetime," she said, "I was never permitted to venture on the Kastel run. To-day I have descended it twice. On both occasions I tried to shoot over David, but on both occasions instinct proved stronger than determination; I raked hard and got round the corner safely."

"All of which proves that life is a burden which it is very difficult for us to set down."

"And yet," she said wearily, "I would set it down very willingly."

"Doubtless," I replied. "Nor am I one who holds that self-destruction is necessarily a crime. Only the number of cases where it is not so are exceedingly small—and yours is not among them."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that you cannot destroy yourself without mutilating the hearts of others. There is some one living to whom your decease would be a terrible—an almost fatal blow."

She lowered her eyes.

"Whom do you mean?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"I mean little Stephan."

"Little Stephan!" she passed her hand across her eyes. "Assuredly grief is a very selfish thing," she cried, "for in the bitterness of my trouble I had almost forgotten him."

"Therefore," I continued softly, "you see it is your duty to live, and I am here to help you carry out that duty."

"You are right," she replied, "but my life is not in danger."

"Pardon me," I said, "Herr Schneider is in the house."

"I know, it was he who told me I was under arrest."

"Is that all he told you?"

"No," she cried indignantly, "that is not all. He had the insolence to demand my hand in marriage."

"I need not ask your reply, but did he not support his suit with certain material consideration?"

"He promised me he could procure my instant release in the event of my accepting him."

"And in the event of your not accepting him?"

"I do not know. When I refused him he told me he could not accept 'No' for an answer, and that in half-an-hour he would see me again, and, if necessary, bring further arguments to bear on me."

"And you have no suspicion what those arguments are?"

"None."

"So! He reserves his brutality in the hope that it may not be necessary to bring it to light. Your Highness, the argument he spoke of was the same one that your brother employed last night to induce me to take a seat in your boudoir."

She started in absolute astonishment, but not, I know, in fear.

"He would threaten me!"

"He would not stop at threats."

"You mean——"

"I mean that he is a lunatic, and a thoroughly dangerous one. He will insist on your promising to be his wife; he will bind you by the most terrible oaths, and if you defy him, he is capable of anything."

"Then your advice?"

"There is only one course practicable and that is to escape. I am a strong man and I value my life no higher than you do yours. But I am unarmed; I have not even with me the knife you presented to me at Mrs. Van Troeber's ball. Moreover Schneider is backed by the force of law and has a couple of soldiers at his disposal. To resist his infamy by force is to play his game for him. We must trust rather to our wits."

"In that case," she said simply, "I thank God that I have you at my side. Your doings of last night fill me with amazement."

"It is the tactics of last night we must repeat," I said. "Herr Schneider, for a clever man, has made two very foolish blunders. In the first place he thinks I am supporting his odious policy; in the second he has left open to you a way of retreat."

"A way of retreat?"

"What is there to stop you stepping out of this window, getting your toboggan, and making your third descent of the Kastel run. Arrived at Weissheim, you can either put yourself under the King's protection or hire a sleigh and push on to the frontier."

"I will not throw myself on the King's mercy."

"Then strike out for the Austrian frontier. The telegraph wires were cut last night, and in all probability are still unmended."

"And what about Stephan?"

"His Royal Highness Prince Stephan von Schattenberg is not exposed to the same dangers as yourself. My influence with the King is very considerable, and anything I can do for your brother's present protection and future welfare will be done."

She held out her hand to me, and I noticed that her eyes were moist with gathering tears. I dreaded a breakdown, for if her purpose failed her it meant a desperate and hopelessly uneven struggle with her persecutor.

I took her hand.

"Be strong," I said gently. "The Schattensbergs are ever at their best in the danger hour."

She tried to speak—words of gratitude I feel sure—but her utterance was choked and she turned away in silence and opened the long French window.

"God be with you—Highness," I murmured, but she did not look round.

I watched her go as far as the toboggan store-room, and then hastily made up my mind to make a detour through the deep snow rather than to retrace my steps through the Castle hall where Herr Schneider was biding his time with a revolver in his breast-pocket. I looked upon the man as barely sane, and when he discovered the part I had played in balking his preposterous aspirations, his consequent outburst of wrath would in all probability

take a homicidal form. Had I been wearing rakes I would have followed the Princess, at a due interval, down the Kastel run, but I was unwilling to tempt Providence by making a second rakeless descent of that difficult course. I wandered out into the garden as far as the track, and was about to cross it when a slight scraping sound told me that some one was coming down. It was the Princess, and she was steering as straight and steady a course as the most critical tobogganner could desire. She raised her eyes momentarily to me as she passed, and raising my cap I breathed a heart-felt message of "good luck."

A second later my eyes fell on Schneider and his two myrmidons. I had looked to see wrath and disappointment on his mobile countenance, but his present expression was rather one of evil triumph, and he shook his head at me as if to point the folly of my attempting to thwart his well-planned scheme. Raising a whistle to his lips he blew a loud shrill call. Instantaneously a horse sleigh emerged from the pine woods below us and proceeded along the path which crosses the toboggan run just above the Devil's elbow. The man's extraordinary villainy was manifest in an instant. Cleverer and baser even than I had imagined, he had foreseen the likelihood of the Princess attempting this particular form of escape, but instead of rendering her attempt impossible, he preferred to let her destroy herself in a fruitless bid for freedom. Foreseeing every detail with fiendish perspicuity, he had retained a sleigh at the upper-crossing with orders to draw across the

track on the preconcerted sounding of a whistle. The *crime passionnel* is ever hard for ordinary mortals to understand, but the morbid passion that can accept with equal delight the possession or destruction of its object is far beyond a normal comprehension. To think was to stand powerless and witness an appalling tragedy, and fortunately I acted by inspiration alone. Wresting a rifle from the hand of one of the two soldiers, I knelt in the snow and fired at the advancing horse. With a feeling of inexpressible thankfulness, I saw that the shot had taken effect. The beast plunged violently and then fell struggling and kicking to the ground. The sleigh was stopped, and the Princess passed safely on her way to Weissheim.

I turned to Herr Schneider with a smile of triumph, but as my eyes lighted upon his countenance the smile froze upon my lips. Never have I seen human features imprinted with such a look of infinite and diabolical hatred. It was not the face of a man I was gazing on but the face of a demon. His eyes rolled, his features twitched, his whole frame shook and quivered with the intensity of his unbridled malice. Then he whipped out his revolver and fired at me ; but his hand was shaking as if with palsy, and the bullet went heaven knows where. Again he fired, and yet again a third time, but in spite of our ridiculous proximity I remained untouched. Then he cast down his weapon with a nameless oath and rushed furiously towards the commencement of the Kastel run.

The soldier, whose rifle I had taken, tapped the

weapon and pointed meaningly to the retreating figure. I shook my head. Herr Schneider's scheme was patent now, and I had no intention of opposing it. The Princess had escaped down the Kastel run, and he would pursue her by the same road. As he was unprovided with rakes his chances of negotiating David (if indeed he got so far) were small in the extreme, and the long death-terminated plunge over the precipice seemed his fore-shadowed end. I watched him take a toboggan from the store-room, and dragging it to the starting point, throw himself on it with the reckless courage of his distorted passion. It would have been easy for me to brain him with the butt end of the rifle as he swept past us, and had I deemed his chances of overtaking the Princess appreciable, I would have done so unhesitatingly. As it was I refrained from doing violence to my feelings, and in the light of what was to happen I am glad. Scarcely had the detective flashed by when the wounded horse scrambled to its feet, and, in spite of its driver's efforts, dragged the sleigh across the ice-run and blocked the track. I saw Schneider swerve in his course and bump first into one bank and then into the other: but there was no escape from the adamant confinement of that downward track. There was a moment of fascinated horror, and then one of the soliders laughed. Herr Schneider's shattered body was lying lifeless in the snow.

CHAPTER XXIII

I BADE the sleigh-driver take back Herr Schneider's dead body to the Brun-varad, and acting on my suggestion the two soldiers accompanied the conveyance. Then solitary and the prey to strange thoughts I walked down the snow path alongside that fatal run. At the scene of the catastrophe I stopped, but save for a streak of frozen blood the ice bore no token of the shattering catastrophe that had divorced the detective's unhealthy soul from his unprepossessing body.

Well, it would have been idle to pretend that I regretted his decease, and I prayed that the splendid-hearted little Princess might win her way to freedom, and ultimately, to consolation and happiness.

Never, when I set out from England had I dreamed of the possibility of such events as I had just participated in, and were it not for one thing, I should have faced the prospect of returning to my native country with the proud consciousness of having not merely moved in events of historical importance, but of having done my duty unflinchingly and with conspicuous success. Unfortunately, there was that in my heart and mind which battled down the proud thoughts of self-congratulation and turned my gladness into a dull pain. Had I been heart-

whole I should have been comparatively happy. As it was, I had looked through the gates of the mind into a region of happiness greater than I had ever before conceived of. The doors were shut, but the memory remained and the brightness of the vision turned the routine of my ordinary life into a dreary sunless journey. And yet, I could say of myself as I had once said of the infatuated Fräulein von Helder, it was better even to dream one's happiness than to miss it altogether. Should I ever revisit Weissheim, I wondered ; would its beauties and its memories call me out again as a sweet song claims irresistibly a second hearing ; or should I henceforth shun it as a place of vague unrest, of bloody troubles and fierce unsatisfied aspirations. And lest the latter fate should be the true one I took what might be my last look from that high point of vantage. The valley beneath me was filled with a white mist, and overhead the usually clear sky was full of heavy purple clouds. In the west the dying sun was setting in a gorgeous panoply of red and gold, and as I looked at the stormy magnificence of the lurid heavens I contrasted their present aspect with their normal one of cool, clear brilliancy. "They do not remind one of Miss Anchester to-night," I said to myself. "There is passion there, passion and tumultuous emotions and a burning recklessness that knows no mastery." And even as when I had formerly made my comparison, so now that I had made my contrast, the object of my thoughts was suddenly brought before me.

Breasting the slope from the direction of Weiss-

heim, wearing the same white beret and the same blue-grey cloak as she had worn on the day I made my ill-fated proposal, was the Royal Governess. I stood aside in the snow to let her pass, and took off my cap.

"Are you from the Marienkastel?" she asked.

"Yes; and you I suppose are going there?"

"Yes. An order has been issued for the Princess's arrest. I have a later order from his Majesty rescinding it."

"You are too late," I said.

"Why? Has she been already arrested? If so, it does not much matter."

"She has escaped."

"Escaped! How?"

"Down the Kastel run."

"You saw her?"

"I helped her."

Miss Anchester opened her eyes in amazement, and a distinct look of admiration crept into them.

"Was that not rather rash?" she asked at length.

"Perhaps: but the circumstances did not admit of excessive caution."

"Explain please."

"Herr Schneider bore the order of arrest, which also gave him authority to fire on the prisoner should she attempt to resist. Armed with this he made the Princess a proposal of marriage, telling me confidentially that he was prepared to overcome her disinclinations by force. Had she persisted in refusing him he would have murdered her."

My companion shuddered.

"How horrible," she said in a low voice, "and yet I doubt if he would have gone beyond mere threat. That would have been bad enough, but Herr Schneider is not a murderer."

"I have irrefutable proof to the contrary," I retorted calmly. "International detectives are not altogether fools though their villainy may be absolute, and our friend had foreseen the possibility of his prey escaping down the Kastel run. Accordingly he stationed a horse-sleigh at the upper crossing, and when the Princess commenced her downward course, the coachman, according to a pre-arranged signal proceeded to drive his conveyance across the track."

"Stop!" Miss Anchester put her hand in front of her eyes as though the vision pained her. I had never seen her display so much emotion, and hastened to relieve her feelings.

"It was all right," I said. "I managed to borrow one of the soldier's rifles and shoot the horse before he could reach the crossing."

"How splendid of you!" Her face was bright again now with the glow of a genuine enthusiasm. "And was not Herr Schneider angry?" and she laughed the excited laugh of relieved tension.

"So angry," I replied, "that he missed me three times with his revolver at a distance of about five paces."

"He fired at you—three times?"

"Yes, and if his temper had been slightly more under control I should have been as dead as he is now."

"He is dead—you killed him?"

"He killed himself. He mounted a toboggan and pursued the Princess. By that time the wounded horse had succeeded in drawing the sleigh athwart the track. They are taking the shattered body to the Brun-varad."

Again my companion shuddered, and covered her face with her hands.

"I am sorry for the Fräulein von Helder," she said, after a considerable interval. "It will break her heart."

"I agree with you that it will break her heart, but I am not sorry for her. There are various ways of having one's heart broken, and I am inclined to think that that way was the most merciful."

There was another pause.

"Mr. Saunders."

"Yes."

"I have often rebuked you and laughed at you for being conceited. I will never do so again."

"I shall miss your badinage."

"Possibly, but I shall have no heart to indulge in it any more. A man who acted as you did last night, and have done to-day, *ought* to have a high opinion of himself. I respected you immensely for having risked your life so splendidly last night to serve a man. To-day you have done as much for a woman, and the romance is greater."

"Like all conceited people," I replied, "I like praise, but your approval would make me proud were I the most diffident of men."

"Where has the Princess gone?" she asked abruptly.

"I suggested that she should make for the Austrian frontier."

"And you will follow her?"

"Heaven forbid! She has been persecuted enough."

"But you are not Herr Schneider."

"Heaven be thanked! Still I am a bachelor and she a maid. The proprieties must be respected even in exile."

"But surely if you love her——"

"Love her," I interrupted: "I do not love her. I have a respectful regard for her: so deep a respect, so strong a regard, that my heart bleeds for the brave little woman—but that is not love. Moreover I am neither a Graf, a von, nor even a Lieutenant, and the Schattensbergs do not mate with commoners. You should have seen her indignation at Schneider's proposal."

"But why compare yourself with him?"

"Why not? An international detective is at least the social equal of a successful linen-draper."

"But if the Princess loves you——"

"The 'if' is the commencement of a preposterous supposition."

"It is not," declared my companion emphatically. "I, her friend, say it is not."

I shook my head.

"I assure you that she loves you," persisted Miss Anchester with convincing earnestness.

"I hope and pray not," I replied, "for I am

incapable of returning her sentiments, and although my affection for her is so great that in a sense it may be called love, it is not love in the most exalted meaning of the word."

"How do you know?"

For answer I pointed at the amazing glory of the heavens. "Is not that sunset more beautiful than the ordinary Weissheim sunset?" I asked. "Even so does love outshine friendship."

Again she asked me.

"How do you know?" and her voice shook a little.

"I know because I have seen both, and though the greater glory was only vouchsafed me in a dream, its beauty was such that it has spoilt my life."

"I do not understand."

"You do not understand," I replied, "because you have nothing in common with the passionate majesty of to-night's sky. And yet once when I had had an accident tobogganning, and my senses were just shaking off the dulness of insensibility, I seemed to read on your features as you bent over me a look that had more in it than the calm icy loveliness of our normal sunsets. Forgive me if I am troublesome, but I have suffered too much to mind making myself ridiculous."

"You still——?" her voice broke in a sob. I gazed at her face and for a second my wits reeled with astonishment. Then surprise gave way to a great burst of hope, and hope in turn to a triumphant certainty, for I read in those grey tear-dimmed eyes what I had believed could never be written there,

the look they had seemed to wear as she bent over my prostrate form by the toboggan run—the look of a loving woman. A second later she was in my arms sobbing and laughing, and I knew that life was a glory and not a curse.

“You’ve—conquered me,” she murmured, “and I’m so—proud.”

“And happy?”

“Absolutely.”

* * * * *

“By the way,” I asked, as we retraced our steps towards the Brun-varad, “you said this morning that you were very angry with me. What was that about?”

She laughed gaily.

“When you made your wonderful descent of the Kastel run last night, the ‘contacts’ were set and your ‘time’ was registered automatically. You completed the course in two minutes and twenty-eight seconds, cutting my record by a second and a quarter.”

I whistled.

“No wonder you were cross!” I said.

“I was very annoyed; but I am so no longer—merely very proud.”

* * * * *

MY DEAR ROBERT,—The Blackwoods are giving a dance at the Empress Rooms on March 2; I hope you will be back in time for it. Agatha is looking charming——”

So wrote my dear scheming parent in a letter which

I found waiting for me on my sitting-room table. I replied as follows :—

“DEAREST MOTHER,—I shall make a point of returning home for the Blackwood’s ball. I am delighted to hear that Agatha looks so charming. Miss Anchester is also looking very charming, and what is more important has promised to be my wife. It appears we both fell in love with each other at first sight, which, considering my fiancée is as discriminating as she is charming is not to be wondered at. King Karl has presented her with a wonderful pearl necklace and me with the Second Class Order of the Black Ostrich set in brilliants, all on the condition that we spend our honeymoon at the Brun-varad.

“Your loving and dutiful son,

“ROBERT.

“P.S. For better or worse (probably the latter) I shall take over the management of the firm of James Saunders and Son on my return.”

THE END

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